The Dissertation Committee for Gabriella Rodriguez Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

The Presence of Past: Experimental Modes of Representation in Neoslave Narratives

Committee:

Jennifer M. Wilks, Supervisor

Lisa L. Moore

Helena Woodard

Erica L. Johnson

The Presence of Past: Experimental Modes of Representation in Neoslave Narratives

by

Gabriella Rodriguez

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2021

Dedication

For Renata and my parents.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Wilks. Thank you for your mentorship and for preparing me for each milestone in this process. Thank you for your thoughtful commentary on my written work. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my dissertation committee, each of whom – in addition to my dissertation supervisor – have shaped my thinking about and understanding of enslavement, race, and identity in a transnational context. Dr. Lisa Moore, you have been a wonderful mentor! Thank you for taking the time to workshop my writing from the earliest (and ugliest) drafts to the final, most polished product. Many thanks for including me in your dissertation writing group where I have had the privilege to work with you and an incredible cohort of scholars. Thank you for creating this affirming and generative space in which I was able to develop my skills as an academic writer. Finally, thank you for being my cheerleader throughout this process! Dr. Helena Woodard, it has been my honor to work with you during the early and final stages of this dissertation project. Our long and fruitful conversations provided me with a solid foundation and overall framing for my work on neoslave narratives and the afterlives of slavery. I would also like to thank Dr. Erica Johnson who has been part of my intellectual and scholarly development from the beginning of my academic career as a freshman at Wagner College. Thank you for introducing me to a world of ideas that continue to challenge me and sustain my interest as I complete my studies at UT Austin many years later. Your impact on my development as a scholar cannot be put into words.

Many thanks to my fantastic, fellow dissertation-writers: Teri Fickling, Leah Butterfield, and Erin Yanota. I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without your feedback, advice, and support. Having worked with all of you over the past two years, I have become a better and more confident writer. Writing in community with such a talented and generous group of scholars has been my absolute privilege. I would also like to thank my colleague, friend, and brilliant scholar, Xuan An Ho. Though technically I was your grad school mentor, I have learned so much from you! I'm grateful our many conversations around graduate school, scholarly work, and everything else. Thank you to everyone who participated in and created the Global South Collective, including Amrita Mishra, Aris Clemons, Nicholas Bloom, Michael Reyes, and Joshua Ortiz Baco. Participating with you all in this Collective as well as the subsequent conference expanded my understanding of what solidarity and community in the academy looks like, making me a better and more accountable scholar, overall.

To my family, thank you for your peerless support and faith in my ability to complete this project. I extend my deepest thanks to Renata Maraj, who has embodied many roles throughout my dissertation journey, including life coach, therapist, cheerleader, and occasional project manager! Thank you for your kindness and patience with me as we have both gone through graduate school together. It is only with your support that was I able to complete this arduous task. I also would not be here without the support of my parents, Yvette Charlemagne and Angel Rodriguez, who have encouraged me to complete my degree and have been my foundation throughout this challenging process. Renata, Mom, and Dad, each of you lives by example; thank you for teaching me what it looks like to persevere and succeed.

Abstract

The Presence of Past: Experimental Modes of Representation in Neoslave Narratives

Gabriella Rodriguez

The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

Supervisor: Jennifer M. Wilks

The Presence of Past: Experimental Modes of Representation in Neoslave Narratives examines the formal devices and representational strategies of authors of African descent who center the experiences of bondspeople in their creative engagements with slavery. Though looking to the past, authors of neoslave narratives mediate debates about the afterlives of slavery and representations of bondspeople in a contemporary context. Through their creative engagements, the neoslave narratives under consideration are also able to demonstrate new ways of knowing the past, ways that eschew traditional historical methods that document slavery.

The neoslave narrative derives its name from the slave narrative, and both genres are rooted in a literary project of counterrepresentation. Slave narratives are typically understood as the written or dictated autobiographical accounts of formerly enslaved people of African descent. A deeply rhetorical genre, eighteenth and nineteenth century

slave narratives represented the earliest endeavors of Black subjects to represent themselves in writing and demonstrate their personhood to overwhelmingly white reading publics. Working through myriad obstacles, ex-slave authors interested in advancing an abolitionist cause deployed several identifiable and recurrent tropes in their writing, tropes that are revisited and revised by contemporary authors in this study.

The novels under analysis emerge at the convergence of a shift in the politics of representation and in the historiography of slavery. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, historical representations of slavery in the U.S. underwent a marked shift as more historians began to account for the validity and significance of slave testimony in their work. Alongside these historiographic shifts, African American, Caribbean and Black British authors began to reflect with more specificity the multifaceted, diasporic experiences of Black subjects in their writing. I argue that these developments formed conditions of possibility for a body of literature aimed at undermining and transforming dominant regimes of representation.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

My dissertation explores how contemporary authors of African descent employ distinctive modes of representation in their neoslave narratives. Through their use of experimental formal devices these authors emphasize affective and corporeal dimensions of understanding the past. Collectively, they elaborate an experimental paradigm of representation as an alternative to the removed posture and teleology of contemporary historiography on slavery. For example, literary techniques of fragmentation and non-linear storytelling as well as modes of figuration that emphasize haunting and ancestral memory are all in the service of their creative reimagining of the time of enslavement and the experiences of bondspeople.[1] By reimagining slavery from the vantage point of the present, these neoslave narratives reflect on the dimensions of Black personhood and experience otherwise left out of the historical record on slavery.

To expand current scholarly work on neoslave narratives, I analyze the genre as a diasporic, global phenomenon. There has been much scholarship on the neoslave narrative within the African American tradition. However, the diversity of slave cultures and the preponderance of these narratives across the African diaspora attest to the multifaceted nature of slave experience. Privileging the U.S. context of slavery, therefore, does not sufficiently attend to the diasporic, transnational phenomenon of slavery. By examining the global nature and heterogeneous form of the neoslave narrative, we are better able to

[1] These examples are not comprehensive.

understand the distinctive modes of representation that have emerged in the wake of African Atlantic slavery.

The novels I analyze emerge at the convergence of several influences on in the politics of representation in the historiography of slavery. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, historical representations of slavery in the U.S. underwent a marked shift as more historians began to account for the validity and significance of slave testimony in their work. Alongside these historiographic innovations, African American, Caribbean, and Black British authors continued to grapple with the deliberate and pervasive marginalization of Black experience in mainstream culture. During the 1980s and 1990s, Black cultural production in the U.S., Caribbean and U.K. continued to grow and reflect the multifaceted, diasporic experiences of Black subjects. I argue that these developments formed conditions of possibility for a body of literature aimed at undermining and transforming dominant regimes of representation. The proliferation of novels portraying slave experience across the African diaspora emerged from this context.

NEOSLAVE NARRATIVES: DEFINING THE GENRE

Overall, authors of neoslave narratives examine the nature of enslavement from the perspectives of bondspeople themselves and focus on subject formation within the economy of chattel slavery. In addition to centering the psychological impacts of enslavement and the materiality of bondage, authors emphasize issues related to historical

violence, cultural memory, identity formation, resistance, race, gender, and representation.[2] At times, the neoslave narrative borrows the generic conventions of the book-length, autobiographical slave narrative, mirroring its plot structure and reinterpreting its themes.[3] Other neoslave narratives are much more experimental in form and intent, utilizing diverse media and literary strategies to imagine and evoke the experiences of the enslaved.

The neoslave narrative's focus on issues of representation is rooted in an eighteenth and nineteenth century project of representing Black personhood in writing. Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) defines neoslave narratives as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom."[4] This definition positions the slave narrative as the direct literary antecedent of the neoslave narrative. The "residually oral," Bell observes, involves a tradition "in which oral forms compete with print."[5] The tension between oral and print cultures is central to understanding the representative stakes of both genres. In the Western tradition, the written word is privileged, and oral cultures are often marginalized.[6] This issue came into focus during the

---

[2] Raquel Kennon, "Neo-Slave Narratives". In *obo* in Literary and Critical Theory, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0017.xml (accessed 23 Jun. 2021).

[3] A deeply rhetorical genre, eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives represented the earliest endeavors of Black subjects to represent themselves in writing and demonstrate their personhood to overwhelmingly white reading publics. Working through myriad obstacles, ex-slave authors interested in advancing an abolitionist cause deployed several identifiable and recurrent tropes in their writing. The book-length autobiographies of ex-slaves feature a linear, conventional plot structure that detail the author's journey from enslavement to freedom.

[4] Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 289.

[5] Bell, *The Afro-American Novel*, 290.

[6] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 148.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for Black authors of the English-speaking world. The failure of printed forms to portray or recognize Black personhood coupled with the absence of African or African-diasporic modes of figuration in print culture presented both obstacles and opportunities for early Black authors.[7]

As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes, early slave narratives reflect a desire on the part of English-speaking Black authors to represent the Black self in written form. This desire is best illustrated through Gates' trope of the talking book, which first appears in Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself* (1770).[8] The trope depicts a failed encounter between oral and print cultures. Gronniosaw, ostensibly part of an oral culture, encounters his white master's book. He finds that it does not "speak" to him, an experience that kindles his desire to write and make the (white) book speak with his (Black) voice.[9] The neoslave narrative inherits this preoccupation with self-representation in writing, albeit in a different cultural context.

I situate the neoslave narrative at the intersection of activist and artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, ones that focused on reclaiming Black experience from the margins and on valorizing Blackness as an identity, politics, and aesthetics. Like the Civil Rights

[7] This failure does not have to do with printed media as a form, per se. I am referring to the issue of self- representation in writing.

[8] The trope reappears in the narratives of Ottobah Cuogano, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and John Jea.

[9] Henry Louis Gates, *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1989): 147. As Gates states, “What remained consistent was that Black people could become speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word.”

Movement, the Black Power Movement (BPM) reflected the desire among Black Americans for political autonomy and freedom. Specifically, it signaled "the determination of Black people to define and liberate themselves"[10] These movements, of course, had global impacts and were reciprocally influenced by nationalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist movements in Africa and the Caribbean.[11] As Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies remark, "the politicization of black identity [in the UK] gained force with new social movements, such as Black Power, which crossed the Atlantic, and Rastafarianism, which came via the Caribbean."[12] As part of a global phenomenon, these movements also emphasized the rejection of racist ideology and institutions through the creation of new systems of meaning and structures in its place. The literary and aesthetic developments that evolved in their wake "propose[d] a...symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology" apart from Western cultural models, turning instead toward the artistic and literary possibilities of representing Black experience on its own terms.[13] The early neoslave narrative partially reflected the positive position of the 1960s and early 1970s and stressed reclaiming Black experience

[10] Bell, *The Afro American Novel*, 236.

[11] Here, I am referencing the struggles for independence that surged during the 1960s in Africa and the Caribbean. I am also thinking of the Pan-African movement, which pre-dates the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, but was central to Black Power thinking about resistance, Western imperialism, and activism, particularly in terms of recognizing how nation-specific oppression and liberation efforts intersect with global struggles of oppressed peoples.

[12] Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, "Introduction," in *A Black British Canon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5. See also Alison Donnell, "Introduction," *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture*, ed. Alison Donnell (New York: Routledge, 2002), ii. "Many of those who had been influential in setting the early agendas around black politics and consciousness in Britain, such as Kamau Brathwaite and other members of the Caribbean Artists Movement, had provided a valuable link between black communities and activities in the USA, the Caribbean and Britain…many of their works and their inspirations had a focus beyond Britain."

[13] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review,* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29.

from the margins. Though they are not formally associated with these movements, the novels under consideration in this project "obliquely register" these political and aesthetic commitments.[14]

Revisionist histories produced during the 1960s and 1970s also reflected the concerns of authors who focused on challenging dominant representations of African American experience and, more specifically, representations of slavery. During the post-WWII era, *American Negro Slavery* (1918) by Ulrich B. Phillips was the prevailing history of slavery in the antebellum South. Overall, Phillips' text emphasized a racist, apologist attitude toward the "peculiar institution."[15] As historians became interested in slave testimony as legitimate historical evidence, new and groundbreaking work emerged. Several groundbreaking texts that counter apologist attitudes toward slavery include Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972), George Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972), Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977), and Marion Wilson Starling's *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (1981). One of the

[14] Madhu Dubey, "Speculative Fictions of Slavery," *American Literature* 82, no. 4 (2010): 781. I differentiate early and later neoslave narratives along the lines Dubey does in her article "Speculative Fictions of Slavery." Dubey makes the distinction between earlier neoslave narratives, whose authors were more stylistically invested in realism, and later work, whose authors used more experimental devices to represent slavery.

[15] Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1967): 538.: "The portrait of slavery that emerged bore a striking resemblance to that espoused by proslavery apologists before the Civil War. The severity of American slavery was minimized, its civilizing and Christianizing functions extolled; the notion that the slave was submissive rather than defiant was reasserted. The overall effect was a verification of the plantation myth…"

most notable contributions to this revisionist historiography is Herbert Gutman's *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), which was written as a direct challenge to the thesis propagated by the infamous Moynihan study.[16] By constructing histories of slavery that considered the written testimony of the slaves themselves (rather than relying solely on apologist secondary sources), revisionist historians challenged derogatory images of bondspeople and undermined racist assumptions about African American families during enslavement. The neoslave narrative is impacted by these developments and is in part a response to debates about historical representations of slavery. Additionally, the texts that I analyze share investments in projects of "corrective counterrepresentation" by writing into literature the experiences that were left out, forgotten, or erased in mainstream historical and literary discourse.[17]

These texts are also responding to a complex field history of literary representations of slavery. Prior to the publication of neoslave narratives in the 1960s and 1970s, slavery in the popular imagination was primarily shaped by Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the*

---

[16] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) and Ashraf H. A Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001): The problematic Moynihan Report (1965) argued that the Black family's decline was due to domineering Black mothers, absentee fathers, and an overall reluctance in African American communities to form nuclear families through marriage. It determined that these factors were key determinants of poverty in African American communities. Moynihan drew on extant histories of slavery to substantiate his work. Historians challenged these reports and the history of slavery upon which these dubious reports based their findings. The Moynihan Report was one of several ethnographic studies aimed at exploring the relation between slavery, race, and poverty in American inner cities. Retrospective critical assessments of this scholarship have not been favorable. As Robin D.G. Kelly points out, much of it reconfirmed scholars' implicit biases about African Americans and pathologized Black urban culture.

[17] Dubey, "Speculative Fictions of Slavery" 779-781. Dubey's article discusses the genre of speculative fictions of slavery: "The proliferating subgenre of speculative fiction meets neoslave narrative."

Wind (1936), an apologist, racist and stereotyped literary representation of enslaved people. Mainstream texts like Mitchell's as well as anti-slavery literature like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offered sentimentalized and flattened depictions of bondspeople. In more contemporary eras, novels like *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) by William Styron and *Roots* (1976) by Alex Haley were complicated by questions not only about "who could, who should, and who was empowered to write about slavery in America," but also how "enslavement should be 'written.'"[18] The romanticization of slavery in American literature also left open the opportunity for more critical assessments of the institution. As more time passed between the time of slavery and the time in which more contemporary authors lived, questions about historical memory and historical authenticity also arose. How might a writer ethically represent experiences of bondage when they have no direct connection to these experiences, neither through living ancestors nor direct testimony? Rushdy documents several other questions around which these literary debates about narrative and form revolved. For example, was

> an author writing about slavery…obligated to occupy a space of circumscribed artistic possibility? Or, on the other hand, could contemporary authors make positive use of their distance from antebellum slavery to take liberties and assume freedoms in their playful innovation and experimentation with form, genre, and tone?[19]

[18] Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Slavery and Historical Memory in Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature*, ed. Ezra Tawil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 237.

[19] Rushdy, 237.

Early examples of the neoslave narrative genre have been discussed in terms of their literary realism and more contemporary novels, in terms of their formal experimentation.

The focus on "documentary realism" in more realist neoslave narratives drew on the rhetorical purpose of genres like the slave narrative, whose elaboration of the experiences of the formerly enslaved was premised on the authenticity and unadulterated truth of their stories. Though divergent in intent, both early African American and neorealist literature share an investment in the idea that material, historical, and social conditions of African American individuals are meaningful.[20] More experimental paradigms for representing slave experience developed in later decades. Dubey describes a turn in literary representation during the post-Civil Rights period as authors felt less acutely "the burden of realist racial representation."[21] The result was a category of fiction that had a "purposefully antihistorical approach to the past," one that "flout[ed] the dictates of realism."[22] While the authors included in this dissertation share these investments in historical recovery and slave agency, the experimental modes of representation their novels employ also demonstrate a profound skepticism about historical modes of understanding

[20] Bernard W. Bell, "The Contemporary Afro-American Novel, 1: Neorealism," in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 235-238.

[21] Dubey, 780. Examples of more realist treatments of slavery include Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1965) and Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). Both texts draw on the oral tradition to tell their stories.

[22] Dubey, 780-81. Dubey differentiates between the realist novels of slavery and speculative novels of slavery. Speculative novels of slavery include "fantasy, science fiction, ghost stories, historiographic metafiction and even vampire tales."

and representing reality. Collectively, they move beyond both positivist ways of knowing as well as knowledge paradigms that are critical. [23]

Alongside these U.S. developments in literary representation, Black cultural production in the UK also experienced a distinctive turn. In contrast to Black British literature of the 1950s and 1960s -- which emphasized the "dramatic immediacy" of the contexts in which they were written -- the literature of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s grappled with the past in order to explore the issues of the present. Historical writing during the 1990s confronted the myth of a 'post-racial' society and established connections among past and present forms of social, structural, and institutional violence. This turn in Black cultural production that occurred in the 1990s also represented Black experience as diasporic at its core and demonstrated the variety of cultural and historical experiences of Black subjects.[24] This was significant in the context of a nation with overly narrow and racialized notions of citizenship, as well as overly simplistic and flattened representations of black subjectivity in literature and other cultural products.

---

[23] Sue L. T. McGregor, *Understanding and Evaluating Research: A Critical Guide* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2018): 23. and Erica L. Johnson, "Ghostwriting Transnational Histories in Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise*," *Meridians* 9, no. 1 (2009): 116. Perspectives shaped by critical epistemologies are invested in questioning the status quo and believe that knowledge is created through critically questioning the power structures that scaffold society. Positivist paradigms are often empirically grounded, approaching knowledge formation through "the belief in certainties, laws of behaviors and principles that provide explanations leading to predictions and control of phenomena." The revisionist historiography that I refer to is critical in the sense that it uses the testimony of the bondsperson to create a history from below. However, their methods of exploring slave testimony do not allow for creative license. As Erica Johnson contends, many creative writers often demonstrate how "sparsely documented historical figures" can "find fuller form through the literary imagination than in fragmentary archival material." As vital as contemporary, critical historiography on slavery is, there is no room for these kinds of creative liberties in this work.

[24] Hall, 447.

A NOTE ON TERMS: NEOSLAVE AND NEO-SLAVE

In departure from most scholarship on the neoslave narrative, I argue that the genre is very much connected to the eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narrative.[25] Many critical monographs take issue with Bell's definition of the genre ("residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom"). But, they seem to do so by conflating Bell and Ashraf Rushdy's definition for the genre. Rushdy is the first scholar to write a critical monograph of the neoslave narrative where he takes up Bell's definition. However, in Rushdy's book, the term neoslave becomes *neo-slave*: "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative." I argue that Rushdy's theorization is based on an overly narrow interpretation of Bell's definition for the genre.

Critical monographs on the neoslave narrative have moved past Bell's definition by referencing neoslave narratives that are more experimental in form as well as ones that do not follow the linear structure of the slave narrative.[26] For example, Arlene R. Keizer argues that most contemporary authors do not have in mind the eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narrative as a model for their own work and that there are many global examples of the genre.[27] This narrow definition of intertextuality (the direct reference of one text to another) is partially why Keizer criticizes Bell's definition for the genre.

[25] Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Repurposing Bell's "neoslave" as "neo-slave," Rushdy looks at novels published in the seventies and eighties that share the generic conventions of the antebellum slave narrative.

[26] Bell, 289. My use of the term neoslave as opposed to "neo-slave" or any other term, has to do with my interest in Bell's definition of the genre.

[27] Keizer calls neoslave narratives "contemporary narratives of slavery."

However, I argue that slave and neoslave narratives are connected because they both share an investment in representing the impacts of enslavement and in representing Black personhood (even if individual authors did not necessarily have in mind the slave narrative as a referent for their work). My use of the term neoslave is also based on a more capacious definition of the slave narrative genre that encompasses a wider range of slave testimony and accounts for a broader geographic area.

General dismissal of Bell is based on an overly narrow view of intertextuality; I also argue that this dismissal is based on an outdated definition of the slave narrative. As John Ernest observes, "traditional book-length autobiographies" are often used to "represent the whole of testimony" even though current scholarship has demonstrated the wide variety of formats in which slave narratives appear.[28] Ernest shows that slave testimony appears in interviews, diaries, pension records, newspapers, private printings, legal documents, broadsides, and even the plantation itself. All of these forms, he argues, are part of the slave narrative genre. By considering other forms of slave testimony beyond that of the book-length narrative, Ernest argues that we get a more complete understanding of slavery and the experiences of the enslaved. Additionally, Nicole N. Aljoe reveals that many slave narratives from the West Indies comprise "nonfiction texts that focus on describing the experience of Caribbean slavery from the slave's perspective or are 'by' Caribbean slaves."[29] More specifically, Aljoe looks at texts produced in the British West

[28] John Ernest, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 11.

[29] Nicole N. Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives of the British West Indies, 1709-1838.* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan 2012), 5.

Indies from the 18th and 19th centuries, analyzing interviews, dialogues, first-person narratives, speeches, memoirs, and newspapers as slave narratives. These diverse forms of testimony across the Caribbean, she argues, also count as slave narratives.[30] Expanding the category of the slave narrative geographically also establishes continuity between literary representations of different locations of African Atlantic slavery. Moreover, differentiating between U.S. and global contexts for slavery draws our attention to place in a way that emphasizes how slave and neoslave narratives respond to contexts of power "engendered by the cultural specificities of plantation slavery" across the Atlantic.[31]

The term '*neo*slave' – as opposed to neo-slave – also emphasizes the long, continuous project of remembering and recognizing the experiences of enslaved human beings. To elaborate, I return to Bell's definition of the neoslave narrative: "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom." The 'residual' comprises "experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture." Therefore, these experiences, meanings, and values emerge in cultural forms as the residue of previous social or cultural formations. Bell suggests, of course, that the oral tradition shows up in the neoslave narrative as a residue and as evidence that there is something about slave experience that can only be expressed in these

[30] Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*, 13. Aljoe offers the first comprehensive study of slave narratives from the Caribbean, asserting that her work in *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838* is an attempt to undermine the marginal status of West Indian slave narratives by analyzing them as a group. Aljoe remarks that even though the Caribbean slave narrative tradition "might not have been a self-conscious one," reading them together reveals their many thematic, formal, and structural similarities.

[31] Aljoe, 11.

terms, not entirely by written culture.[32] He writes, "Whereas an oral culture relies primarily on sound, the spoken word, and a literate culture primarily on sight, the written word, residually oral cultures rely on the interplay or dialectic between the two."[33] What Bell's definition suggests is that the neoslave narrative is comprised of the residue of the slave narrative *and* African oral tradition.

I argue that connection between these two genres has to do with shared modes of representation for demonstrating the legacies of enslavement and establishing Black personhood. A rhetorical genre, the slave narrative worked to mobilize the recognition of Black personhood, a prerequisite of sorts for the abolition of slavery. The representational strategies of the slave narrative focus on giving a more accurate picture of enslavement and worked to counter the misconception that bondspeople were content in their status as slaves and that slavery was a benevolence. The authors of slave narratives worked to dispel these lies about slavery by representing it from their perspectives, focusing extensively on the cruelties they endured as well as the physical and psychological tolls of enslavement. The slave narrative genre is a significant body of work because it is the first genre produced by people of African descent in writing, establishing a formal basis for the subsequent genre of the neoslave narrative and its representative focus

[32] Gates is also making the important case that African American literature is not derivative of European or Anglo-American traditions by proposing an African diasporic expressive lineage.

[33] Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122, quoted in Bell, *The Afro-American Novel,* 20.

Rushdy proposes an intertextual model of reading that examines neo-slave narratives as "cultural products emerging from and contributing to a specific social condition."[34] According to Rushdy, a model of intertextuality that is limited to describing the relationship between the formal features of one text and another is overly simplistic.[35] Referencing models of 'political intertextuality,' 'histo-textuality,' and 'inter(racial)textuality,' Rushdy's intertextual method is one that accounts for "the complex interplay among literary texts, social processes, and cultural imperatives."[36] This model allows us to understand how literary *form* "contributes to and is partially derived from the processes of racial formation."[37]

SPECULATIVE OPTICS AND THE ARCHIVE OF SLAVERY

A series of questions guides my work on neoslave narratives. As Saidiya Hartman notes, if writers probe into the imaginary, writing "at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown," what are the limits of the unknowable?[38] Who defines what counts as "fact, fantasy, desire and violence"?[39] What models are useful for querying the ethics of historical representation? Likewise, what does it mean when an author of fiction produces this act of

[34] Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives*,14. Rushdy uses the term neo-slave as opposed to neoslave.

[35] Rushdy, 14.

[36] Rushdy, 18

[37] Rushdy, 7.

[38] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1.

[39] Hartman, 5.

narration? Are neoslave narratives counter-histories? If so, then what are their objectives and protocols?[40]

In attempting to address the violence of the archive, these texts test the limits of representation, discourse, and narration.[41] The archive "regulates and organizes" what can be said about an historical event; in concretizing history, it also creates "subjects and objects of power."[42] Narrating a counter-history of the subaltern is a powerful subversion of the "protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements;" each author in this dissertation, nevertheless, subjects their own method to scrutiny and reckons with the limits of the sayable.[43]

In addition to Saidiya Hartman's indispensable scholarship on ethics and representation, I use Erica Johnson's term "contrapuntal history-telling" to reflect on the strategies authors use to imagine the past.[44] Johnson explains that 'history-telling,' involves imagining the silenced histories of diasporic communities by drawing from documented history as much as possible and engaging the historical text in the process of the author's narrative world-making.[45] These texts use history as part of their narrative patchworks. And,

---

[40] Hartman, 4.

[41] Hartman, 9.

[42] Hartman, 10

[43] Hartman, 4. and *Postcolonial Studies: Key Concepts*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 2000), 199. I use the term subaltern to get at the power dynamics inherent in representing the stories of those whose experience are left out of the archive or as Johnson puts it those whose stories have been "sparsely documented." These figures are subaltern in the sense that they did not "have access to the means by which they may control their own representation."

[44] Johnson, "Ghostwriting Transnational Histories," 118.

[45] Erica L. Johnson, "Building a Neo-Archive: Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*," *Meridians* 12, no. 1 (2014). Like Hartman, Johnson contends that the information that can be gleaned from archival material is partial and mediated. For both scholars, however, this

though authors may have artistic license, "the writer assumes a particular ethical stance manifested in her use of archival material as referents for her fictions."[46] These texts also engage imaginative modes of memory work and haunting. Memory work, as the name suggests, also involves "interpretive labor" which manifests in the author's imagining of a colonial past, but also in reckoning with the co-presence of past, present and future.[47] The kind of imaginative work that goes into this writing engages with the invisible, the ghostly, and the unimaginable. Thus, haunting is a useful language and lens with which to name and register the social violence inflicted by regimes of power.[48]

In representing the ghostly traces of slavery, the recursive nature of time, and the global affinities produced by the slave trade, the neoslave narratives I look at engage with experimental modes of representing the past. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon contends that an epistemology of haunting reveals how "dispossession, exploitation, [and] repression" manifest in daily life.[49] Master narratives are inherently limited in addressing the concrete effects of power because their narratives are partial and incomplete. Gordon's hauntology offers a useful means of entering into "contemporary debates about history and historicism" related to the politics of representation.[50] Haunting challenges conventional

---

does not mean doing away with that historical material. To narrate or explore these stories, authors in this dissertation build on and work with archival material.

[46] Johnson, "Ghostwriting Transnational Histories," 116.

[47] Johnson, "Ghostwriting Transnational Histories," 153.

[48] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008), xvi.

[49] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xv.

[50] By master narrative, I refer to dominant discourses about historical events or social categories. I see master narratives inhered in cultures through literature, news media, art, film, etc. Yogita Goyal, "Africa and the Black Atlantic," *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014): viii.

means of representing and recognizing social violence by calling attention to the ways in which time is recursive and nonlinear.[51] This ghostliness of time, which undermines a clear separation between past, present, and future, poses representational challenges for registering social violence, especially the effects of an event that is "supposedly over and done" with or those events whose "oppressive nature is denied."[52] Gordon's attention to the dynamic interplay among past, present, and future is balanced against her assertion that the manifestations of haunting can be registered concretely. In this way, haunting is also focused on the corporeality of history, while advocating new methods of apprehension beyond what human beings can register through their senses. Avery Gordon speaks about the methodology of haunting from a sociological perspective. In this dissertation, I show how the neoslave narrative engages an episteme of haunting in describing these material experiences and the afterlives of violence slavery entails.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1: Signifyin(g) Upon the Slave Narrative: Black British Identity in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*

Chapter 1 explores how Caryl Phillips, in his novel Cambridge (1991), takes up the tropes of slave narratives to offer a trenchant critique of respectability politics in the Thatcherite era. As the source material for the novel, Phillips consulted The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African (1789) and A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw

[51] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvii
[52] Gordon, xvi.

Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself (1770). Like the emergent Black authors whom he resembles, Phillips' main character, Cambridge, uses his slave narrative to establish his humanity. To present themselves as human beings with rational faculties, early Black authors had to distance themselves from their ostensible status as objects, cargoes, commodities, and so on. Like the slave narratives from which Phillips borrows, Cambridge's narrative features predictable patterns and themes. The fictional slave narrator of Phillips' novel discusses his capture in Africa and harrowing experiences on the Middle Passage as well as the material conditions aboard the slave ship and plantation. The significance of literacy also features prominently, acting as a catalyst for Cambridge's psychological and spiritual transformation. The desire to be seen as a human being is satirized in Cambridge. Philip endows Cambridge with a desire not merely to be human, but also to be an Englishman. In doing so, Cambridge disavows his identity as an African.

This erasure of blackness borrows from the rhetorical strategies of early Black authors who wanted to distance themselves from their status as objects (overwhelmingly, to be Black in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to be perceived as subhuman). Phillips reproduces this erasure, and in effect doubles it – ultimately satirizing Cambridge's untenable and absurd position. Although he thinks of himself as "an Englishman albeit a bit smudgy of complexion," the world around him does not. Even though he becomes a literate, respectable Christian, he is recaptured and sold back into slavery. I argue that these identity issues are satirized to critique contemporary racial politics in the UK, specifically a politics of cultural assimilation premised on the erasure of Black identity.

Chapter 2: Octavia Butler's Kindred and Black Feminist Strategies of Survival

In this chapter, I identify Butler's *Kindred* (1979) as a handbook of Black feminist thinking about resistance. Although it was published forty years ago, the novel is a prescient document for the Black Lives Matter era. *Kindred* offers a grammar of possibility for envisioning how to enact freedom in contexts of precarity. Butler focuses on the experiences of Dana, an African American writer living in Los Angeles during the 1970s. Inexplicably, Dana journeys back through time to the antebellum era, transported to the Weylin plantation in nineteenth century Maryland. The crux of the novel hinges on Dana's ability to ensure the survival of Rufus, Dana's distant ancestor and a slaveholder. In a series of visits, Dana is catapulted back and forth between past and present. Each time she returns to the Weylin plantation, Rufus' life is in danger, and Dana must intervene, often seriously jeopardizing herself to save Rufus. According to an old family tree she consults, Dana knows that Alice, a bondswoman, will bear Rufus' two children. Ensuring the existence of Dana's distant ancestors means that she cannot intervene to prevent Rufus and Alice's non-consensual union. These difficult circumstances limit Dana's choices and curtail her ability to resist. Though she has the benefit of retrospect and valuable technologies at her disposal, Dana struggles to survive enslavement in nineteenth-century Maryland. Instead, she must resort to covert, less visible forms of resistance.

Butler cites a conversation she had with a young man affiliated with the Black Power Movement as the genesis for her desire to write a novel that imagines what it would be like to send a person from her own generation back to the time of slavery. She also discusses wanting to resolve the feelings of shame she had as a child about the limited

kinds of choices her family members had to make in a context of dispossession. In *Kindred,* I argue that Butler distances herself from what she saw as the Black Power diminishment of Black women's forms of survival, care, activism and resistance. Dana learns early that being a modern person does not necessarily bestow her any advantages in the past. Resistance is incredibly difficult, especially because she is a woman. I demonstrate however, that Dana enacts modes of resistance that are related to waywardness, fugitivity, and refusal, which have become key concepts in the Black feminist writings of the last decade. I close the chapter by reflecting on the Black Lives Matter era and how *Kindred* can help contemporary readers appreciate forms of resistance that do not immediately register as such.

Chapter 3: The Limits of Legal Discourse: Sounding a New Language in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

In this chapter, I look at Philip's poetic intervention into the violence of legal language. Philip takes the Zong massacre as her focus and rearranges the language in the insurance litigation of *Gregson v. Gilbert,* the only extant primary document about the massacre, in her poetry. This case document details an insurance dispute over the deliberate jettison of 142 African captives on board the Zong. I show that Philip acts as a conduit for ancestral memories and experiences, making the archival text "speak" in a new way. She explodes the legal text to speculatively engage a story that has never been told: a story of the Zong massacre that emphasizes the affective and corporeal experiences of those on board. Using strategies of erasure, fragmentation, and multiple linguistic registers, Philip poetically reimagines these experiences.

In addition to analyzing the formal elements of the poetry, I also look at the performance aspect of *Zong!*. Each year since the collection was published, Philip has been holding durational readings that incorporate music, dance, chanting, and collective performances of the poems. I take these performances to be an extension of the text itself. The multiple voices embedded in the written poem gain materiality in these performances, with Philip embodying the role of the griot. I discuss the formal strategies utilized in the collection and connect these close readings with a discussion of Philip's method.

Chapter 1: Signifyin(g) Upon the Slave Narrative: Black British Identity in Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*

INTRODUCTION

In his 2001 essay, "Ignatius Sancho: A Black British Man of Letters," Caryl Phillips explores the legacy of Sancho's life and writings, remarking,

> Sancho held the key to understanding British society through both his command of the language and his bearing. However, by virtue of his pigmentation and history, he was doomed to occupy a role both 'central' and 'peripheral.'[53]

No doubt aware of the painful doubleness at the center of his existence, Ignatius Sancho communicated his experience of being Black and British in the context of eighteenth-century England, a nation whose definition of national belonging was predicated on a racially constructed notion of citizenship. Though his life was indeed remarkable, Sancho was by no means an anomalous figure in British society at the time: people of African descent, especially in the trading centers of Liverpool, Bristol, and London, occupied a variety of positions in social and cultural life before and during the eighteenth century. What distinguished him in this context was his role as a public figure. Indeed, Sancho's posthumously published *Letters* (1768-1780) shed light on his role as an interlocutor with prominent literary figures, and, as evidenced by the list of individuals awaiting receipt of the first edition of *Letters*, his reputation as a writer was well regarded among England's reading publics.[54] Interest in Sancho's letters was also probably due to

[53] Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 252.

[54] Vincent Carretta, "Introduction," in *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), xxviii.

the status of writing produced by people of African descent, which was often viewed as an object of curiosity.

Despite his role as a Black public figure, at times Sancho's writing reflects ambivalence about slavery and the trade. In the introduction to the 1994 edition of *Letters*, Paul Edwards and Polly Rewt describe Sancho's correspondence as giving "the impression of [his] being almost wholly assimilated into the lifestyle and values of polite eighteenth-century English society."[55] Some letters demonstrate Sancho's assessment of the racial injustices to which he was subject, and in others there are apologies for slavery and the trade itself. In Phillips's estimation, these discrepancies can be accounted for by the fact that Sancho was acutely aware of his status in England as a public Black figure. His desire for belonging is indicative of his desire to provide an alternative and more dignified model of blackness than what was commonly represented in eighteenth century England. The incongruence between Sancho's status as a Black Englishman and his views are also reflective of an author struggling to come to terms with his many subject positions; perhaps it is also indicative of his own discomfort with doing so. These negotiations are reflected in Sancho's tendency towards assimilation to English cultural and political norms rather than expressing his experiences as a racialized subject.

Though written in a context hundreds of years removed from Sancho's own time, Phillips's 1991 novel, *Cambridge*, takes up the identitarian issues reflected in the writing of emergent Black British authors to query the possibilities of racial identity and national

[55] Paul Edwards and Polly Rewt, "Introduction," in *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, ed. Paul Edwards and Polly Rewt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 3.

belonging in a contemporary context. Mimicking the literary strategies of these authors, Caryl Phillips critiques a form of respectability politics predicated on assimilation and anti-Black racism.

A brief consultation with the slave narratives and early writing from which he borrows demonstrates the extent to which the novel is working to mimic if not mirror their themes and tropes. In addition to reflecting on the issues outlined in Sancho's writing, Phillips takes as a starting point the slave narratives *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770) and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). Phillips interweaves this primary source material throughout the novel, forming the textual basis for Cambridge's narrative. These passages, however, are not merely lifted to give the novel a sense of historical verisimilitude. An integral component of Phillips' narrative strategy is the purposeful selection, strategic placement, and intentional manipulation of the source material in his contemporary narrative. Though the text is self-consciously syncretic, Phillip defines the novel both within and against the generic conventions of early Black writing by repeating and revising these tropes in his novel. Building on important scholarly work that locates Phillips' literary influences, my intervention into *Cambridge* focuses on its revision of these literary strategies.

Like Sancho, ex-slave authors writing in the eighteenth century worked through myriad obstacles. Those interested in advancing an abolitionist cause also deployed several identifiable and recurrent tropes in their writing. Demonstrating their personhood through written letters was a key concern of ex-slave authors and deeply impacted the literary

strategies of autobiographical slave narratives. Among white reading publics, the assumption that the rational faculties of people of African descent were diminished or non-existent prompted doubts about the authenticity of slave narratives. Black authors were acutely aware of this general skepticism, and it had a significant impact on their rhetorical strategies. Beginning with the statement, "I was born," for example, is characteristic of many early slave narratives, perhaps as James Olney remarks, to establish a basic, existential fact of existence.[56]

Identifying oneself by name reflects Black authors' preoccupation with identity, autonomy, and freedom. Slave names were of course issued and possessed by slave owners. The bestowal of slave names was, thus, an intentional act of cultural and subjective erasure, an attempt to produce human property over human beings.[57] Whether assigned to those recently captured in Africa or to those bought and sold in the Americas, slave names are in effect a form of un-naming. Authors of African descent working within this tradition were very much attuned to the ways in which they were located and constructed by colonial ideology and literary discourse as subjective absences. In the narratives from which Phillips borrows most heavily the authors' multiple names (James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw; Gustavus Vassa/Olaudah Equiano) represent their heterogeneous identities and signal their desire to claim the rights of authorship. In early slave narratives, naming and choosing

[56] James Olney, "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 155.

[57] Kimberly W. Benson, "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American Literature," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed., Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 1984), 151.

one's name, is a mechanism of rhetorical self-making and figures as a sign of identification. However, the literary self-making associated with naming in autobiographical slave narratives, while a seemingly liberatory practice, at times belies the rhetorical protocols of the slave narratives. White reading publics were the primary audience for this body of work; therefore, inclusion in the human community sometimes required ex-slave authors to disavow the abject blackness that would otherwise relegate them to non-being status. At times, authors found ways, whether subtle or overt, to distance themselves from their African heritage, an issue that is duplicated in Cambridge's neoslave narrative. Recognizing these intertextual dimensions in the novel reveals the extent to which Cambridge is also working through a dialectic of identity and representation.

The story of *Cambridge* revolves around two central figures: the enslaved Cambridge (né Olumide, Tom, David Henderson) and Emily Cartwright. Both characters come to inhabit the same fictional West Indian plantation on an unnamed island; however, each of their narratives offers a unique perspective, though discrepant account of events. While each has a distinct and separate relation to the slave trade, both share a sense of being dispossessed and alienated by their displacement. Emily, whose narrative comprises the lengthy Part I, is the daughter of an absentee plantation owner who is sent to her father's plantation for what is meant to be a short stint. When she arrives in the West Indies, she must adjust to the realities of life in the Caribbean as she is confronted by a disagreeable overseer and the many groups within colonial society, including the plantation employees, slaves, and white creoles with whom she socializes. In Part II, Phillips introduces Cambridge in a first-person account that mirrors the autobiographical slave narrative. As

we learn from Emily's journal, Cambridge has been arrested for the murder of the plantation overseer. Writing from jail and awaiting his hanging, Cambridge understands this written testimony is his only chance to explain himself and would likely be the only account of his life after he dies. Over the course of the narrative, we learn that the African-born Cambridge was enslaved and conscripted into servitude by an English captain. After attaining his freedom, he lectures on the abolitionist circuit. However, while en route to Africa, Cambridge is captured, re-enslaved, and sold to the Cartwright estate in the West Indies.

To date, scholarship has treated the novel as a commentary on the psychological impacts of slave culture and the moral contradictions inherent within colonial society. However, by ignoring the conditions in which Phillips wrote Cambridge, only a partial understanding of the novel can be achieved. Though the novel takes place in the eighteenth century, I situate it in the context of the post-World War II immigration boom in Britain, a time during which new migrants arrived in record numbers and a subsequent generation of Black Britons came of age, putting pressure on racially constructed notions of Englishness. I argue that the emergent issues in Cambridge reflect the representational issues at stake in Black cultural production in Britain during the 1990s. As Stuart Hall asserts, a cultural shift began to take shape in Black cultural politics during this time, a turn precipitated by "a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself."[58] Artists and writers committed to critiquing stereotypical modes of representation

[58] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 441.

were now also turning their attention to the plurality of Black experience, particularly by representing the Black subject in relation to sexuality, class, gender, and ethnicity. Troubling the normalization of white aesthetic and cultural discourses, these new articulations of Black experience demonstrated the variety of cultural and historical experiences of Black subjects in Britain.

By signifying upon early writing by people of African descent, Phillips can intervene in these debates about the politics of representation. Significantly, the slave narrative is a genre that demonstrates early endeavors of Black subjects to represent themselves in writing. Phillips signifies the ex-slave author's desire to represent the self in writing; however, for Cambridge, representing the self also entails reconciling his warring ethnic and racial identities. In representing the Black subject as a diasporic subject, Phillips pushes back on the perceived stability of the narrator's identity as a "Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion."[59] The emergent Black British writing to which Phillips gestures in the novel signals his interest in intertextuality and concerns about representation, demonstrating throughout the novel "an awareness of the Black experience as a diaspora experience."[60] In this way, the novel mediates the relationship between identity and race, reflecting the representational issues of Black identity and cultural production in contemporary Britain.

What bears repeating as perhaps the most significant part of Phillips' process is his revision of the primary source material. This intertextual dimension – namely, the novel's

[59] Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (New York: Vintage Press, 1991), 147.
[60] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 447.

reference to and revision of the tropes in early writing by English-speaking authors of African descent – is what I mean when I say that *Cambridge* is a signifying text. In his seminal book, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines signification and outlines the significance of intertextuality, repetition, and revision to African American letters. Signifyin(g) at the level of semiotics is a mode of linguistic play that exploits the gap between the literal and figurative meaning of words. To signify is "to improvise verbally, using free play to achieve irony and perhaps power."[61] Signification, then, is activated in the slippage between signifier and signified, emphasizing the multiplicity of meaning in language.[62] This "double-voicedness" also figures at the level of formal revision in literature as a call and response among different texts within the same tradition. This mode of signifying results when authors deploy tropes and replicate formal patterns they have encountered in other texts. Though signifyin(g) is primarily part of a methodology associated with African American literary studies, it is a particularly generative concept for the study of Black literary discourse. Indeed, the extent to which the novel is a "double-voiced text" reveals overlap between African American and Black British modes of figuration.

In this chapter, I will introduce the historical circumstances surrounding the proliferation of Black British literature. The proliferation of Black British writing in the

[61] D. Quentin Miller, "Introduction and Overview: The Stories of African American Literature," in *The Routledge Introduction to African American Literature* (London: Routledge, 2016), 21.

[62] Miller, "Introduction," 21. For example, practices like "playing the dozens" (verbal banter consisting of clever insults) and rapping with their emphasis on irony, punning, and double meaning arise from this tradition.

post-World War II era is a significant context for the emergence of a series of aesthetic and representational concerns that *Cambridge* engages. Likewise, I examine the 1990s context for the novel, paying particular attention to anti-black racism and the conservative political imaginary. These historical, aesthetic, and political issues underscore the relation of the novel to its contemporary moment. I, then, look at critical treatments of the novel by focusing on scholarship that emphasizes Phillips' narrative and linguistic strategies. Next, I compare Cambridge's literary self-making strategies with those of English-speaking Black writers of the eighteenth century. I show that Phillips satirizes Cambridge's self-making strategies, demonstrating the unresolved ambivalence at the heart of Cambridge's identity as a Black Englishman.

BLACK BRITISH WRITING: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND RACIAL DIFFERENCE

The years after WWII in Britain were marked by domestic insecurity and attenuating global significance. In the wake of its imperial decline, English identity appeared to be in flux. The rise of regional nationalisms, the emergence of new cultural and ethnic identities, the post-war immigration boom, and the growing influence of foreign technology and culture produced a sense within Britain that "the center was failing to hold."[63] Predictably, Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean were placed at the center of this narrative of national decline. Mass migration from former colonies in the 1950s and 60s and a subsequent generation of Black Britons coming of age in the 1970s and 80s put pressure on racially constructed notions of Englishness. Within this context of

[63] Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 160.

austerity and insecurity, the threat of Black immigration and settlement was a convenient narrative, and Black Britons, a terrifying personification of the national crisis.[64]

Attuned to these deep-rooted anxieties, in 1983 the Conservative Party commissioned an election poster that appeared in minority presses across the country.[65] The poster was meant to offer a critique of the Labour party's embrace of multiculturalism. However, it was ultimately decried for evoking an implicit dichotomy between blackness and Britishness. Placed as an advertisement in magazines, the poster features an image of a young Black man dressed in a suit with a large caption reading, "Labour says he's black. Tories say he's British." In addition to the image, the ad declares that "With the Conservatives, there are no 'blacks,' no 'whites,' just people…Yet the Labour Party aim to treat you as a 'special case'...The question is, should we divide British people instead of uniting them?" Replicating British anxieties about race and national identity, the poster's distinction between Labour and Conservative party views is reproduced as a literal distinction between 'black' and 'British.'

This conservative national imaginary represents Black identity as antithetical to national unity. National cohesion, in the Tory view, requires assimilable Black British citizens. In addition to this racial calculus, the poster suggests that successful assimilation also hinges on adopting bourgeoise, middle-class values. The figure in the poster draws on Thatcherite notions of "upward mobility" and "economic virility" as constitutive of British

[64] Waugh, *Harvest,* 43.

[65] Oxford, Bodleian Library POSTER 1978/9-34b: https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/715bdb88-e7a7-436b-855c-9f26ada19d73/.

nationality.[66] According to New Right discourse in the 1980s, anti-racism and cultural pluralism were inherently threatening to British nationalism.[67] Jenny Bourne identifies these sentiments as a new kind of racism, promoted by New Right politicians and intellectuals.[68] This new racism, Bourne observes, "was based on cultural difference and the need to defend 'our' way of life."[69] These nativist attitudes are also reflected in Thatcher's feelings about foreigners. In a 1978 speech, she remarked that "people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture."[70] Bourne suggests that the casting of Black British activists as the enemy within stimulated renewed interest among conservative politicians in assimilation as a means of preserving "national, Christian values."[71] Underpinning these attitudes was a historic transformation in the racial and ethnic makeup of the UK after World War II .

[66] Phillips, *A New World Order*, 278. Thatcher was Prime Minister in the 1980s and 1990s.

[67] New Right refers to a strand of Conservatism that is associated with Margaret Thatcher. This group was ideologically aligned with social conservatism and economic liberalism.

[68] Jenny Bourne, "'May We Bring Harmony'? Thatcher's Legacy on 'Race,'" *Race & Class* 55, no. 1 (2013): 89.

[69] Bourne, 89.

[70] Bourne, 88.

[71] Bourne, 89.

Figure 1: "Labour says he's black. Tories say he's British" (1983).

The post-war period in Britain could be characterized as a period of reckoning when the nation grappled with questions of national identity and belonging. Between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, over half a million immigrants from the Caribbean, dubbed the Windrush Generation, came to Britain. In the wake of Partition, more settled from India and Pakistan along with immigrants from the African continent. The British Nationality Act of 1948 gave all members of the Commonwealth easy access to relocate abroad, as the nation needed a cheap and large supply of labor in the wake of a devastating war. Caryl Phillips describes the generation of immigrants that came to Britain after WWII as "altruistic," hoping to aid Britain during a time of need.[72] Ultimately, they came to secure their dreams of upward mobility and financial security for their children; however, the motherland was loathe to wholly embrace her subjects.[73] Black immigrants faced backlash, suffered indignities, and encountered structural barriers to living in Britain. When he was an infant, Phillips and his family immigrated with the Windrush Generation and settled in Leeds. In Phillips' assessment, Caribbean immigrants presented a bit of a conundrum to British society. Unlike other immigrants from Africa or India, the Caribbean immigrant was socialized British: "They were English-speaking Christians who had studied their Shakespeare and Wordsworth at school, and... seemed able to synthesize [their] peculiar ethnic aberrations with a broad understanding of the ways of the British."[74] In short, the Caribbean migrant was as British in character as were most Britons. Violent racism to

[72] Phillips, *New World Order*, 269.
[73] Phillips, 269-270.
[74] Phillips, 273.

which these immigrants were subjected was premised, then, on skin-deep differences, a signal to the newly arrived immigrants that no Black person could ever be British no matter his or her level of assimilation.

Caryl Phillips describes a marked shift in attitudes about Britishness that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s as he, along with a second generation of Black Britons, came of age. They had different views about national identity than did their parents' generation. Though they also faced discrimination and harassment, the second generation felt because of having grown up in Britain, a sense of being British in a way their parents did not: "We spoke with the same accents as the other kids, we watched the same television programmes, we went to the same schools, we did the same exams. Surely we were British."[75] The paradigm of national cohesion suggested by the campaign poster was premised on the negation of Britain's racialized others. In the Conservative's view, if Black Britons were here to stay, it was better that the nation only tolerate those who assimilate. These sentiments reflected a backlash to the emergence of a generation emboldened by their experiences growing up British and potentially less tolerant of second-class status. This context also produced a watershed of writing, performance art and visual media that explored the experiences of being Black in Britain.

Black cultural production, particularly the film, literature and art that emerged out of post-war Britain, was marked by twin impulses: the desire to critique the dominant modes of representation in British culture and the commitment to reversing the

[75] Phillips, 275-276.

stereotypical nature of Black representation in aesthetic and cultural discourses.[76] The politics of antiracism and the Black Power movements in the U.K. were integral in the development of Black consciousness among Asian, Caribbean, and African-descendant Britons. The word 'black,' though used among groups with distinct histories, ethnicities, and class affiliations, signified a shared experience and common history of racism.[77] As Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies note, "the performative function of...identitarian terms as signifiers of political mobilization and representation" unified a great number of individuals across various differences.[78] As internal conflicts among ethnic groups proliferated, by the 1980s and 1990s, the marker 'black' fell out of use for people of Asian descent. The "'individualist cast' of the post-Thatcherite period," also made it increasingly difficult to identify under a single organizing category.[79] Low and Wynne-Davies characterize a distinct turn in the 1990s where 'Black' British came increasingly to signify "a chosen Afro-centric" cultural identity."[80] This period is also the context out of which *Cambridge* and other Black British writing of the time emerged.

Produced primarily by a generation of Black Britons raised in England, this literature offers insight into emergent questions about identity, difference, and race in the

[76] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 441.

[77] Hall, 443.

[78] Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, "Introduction," 5. During this time, Black artists were concerned with limited and stereotypical representations of Black subjects in British culture.

[79] Low and Wynne-Davies, "Introduction," 4.

[80] Low and Wynne-Davies, 4. Generally both 'Black' as a sign of political and cultural consciousness and 'Black' as a means of describing people of African-descent are used throughout scholarship on Black British writing.

decades after WWII.[81] The writers of the 1960s and 1970s were part of a "new phase in Black cultural politics," determined to "transform the dominant regimes of representation" and critique the objectification of Black subjects.[82] As a result, their work put increasing pressure on insular notions of ethnic identity vis-à-vis the nation. New articulations of cultural identity in Black British writing examined the same issues of representation as did the writing of the 1960s and 1970s; namely, troubling the normalization of white aesthetic and cultural discourses. The1990s also marked a concurrent historical turn in Black British writing.[83]. Historical writing during the 1990s confronted the myth of a 'post-racial' society and established connections among past and present forms of social, structural, and institutional violence.

In what follows, I discuss the methods Phillips uses to construct Cambridge's slave narrative. Using the scholarship of Lars Eckstein, I explore the narrative strategies of historical pastiche. I also discuss Evelyn O'Callaghan's work on *Cambridge,* focusing on what she describes as Phillips' interest in "linguistic uprooting." These are concerns I relate to experiences of slave narrative authors as well as the novel's identitarian concerns.

Constructing the Neoslave Narrative: Historical Pastiche

Lars Eckstein and Evelyn O'Callaghan's excavation of the source material used in *Cambridge* is important work that draws attention to the ethical and political stakes of

[81] Chris Weedon, "British Black and Asian Writing since 1980," in *British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010),* ed. Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 40-42.

[82] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 443.

[83] James Procter, "Recalibrating the Past: The Rise of Black British Historical Fiction," in *British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010),* ed. Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 129.

Phillips' approach, in particular, the extent to which it destabilizes master narratives through its creative narrative patchwork. O'Callaghan has shown how *Cambridge* uses "specific incidents, phrases, and even whole passages...from [his] source documents," specifically from Matthew "Monk" Lewis' *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* , Lady Nugent's *Journal*, and Alison Charles Carmichaels' *A Scotswoman in the West Indies.*[84] She compares passages between *Cambridge* and these source documents, showing the novel to be a composite, "syncretic fabrication."[85] Like O'Callaghan, Eckstein reads *Cambridge* as a "palimpsest" and compares passages in Phillips' text with eighteenth century slave narratives. Scholarship that has probed into the novel's intertextual dimensions have stopped short of discussing the extent to which *Cambridge* borrows from and revises genre-specific tropes of either the travel journal or the slave narrative. O'Callaghan's work demonstrates how Phillips' historical-fictional "pastiche" -- the melding of fictional prose with actual archival material -- creates a sense of historical verisimilitude. Rather than attempting to provide closure or give voice to the forgotten, this narrative technique calls attention to the unreliability of the self-reflexive, archival text; namely, the journals, newspapers, and historical documents Phillips used and repurposed in his writing.[86]

Through extensive archival work, Eckstein explores these issues through a set of correspondences between Phillips and his friend, Paul Edwards, in the months before the

[84] Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no. 2 (1993): 36

[85] O'Callaghan, "Historical Fiction," 39.

[86] O'Callaghan, 39.

novel's publication. In a letter to Phillips, Edwards suggests that the primary sources overpower the writing and impoverish Phillips' attempts to flesh out his characters. Considerate but firm, Phillips' response suggests that he is unwilling to remove the source material and rebuts his reviewer's claim that the chapter on Cambridge is "an impersonal patchwork with little contemporary value."[87] On the contrary, Phillips asserts somewhat modestly, "some craft has gone into the meaning of this new fabric."[88] The use of archival material as a referent provides the novel with a sense of historical authenticity. Juxtaposing accounts from warring perspectives and seemingly oppositional subject positions also attests to the power that many witnesses, experiences, and voices have in recounting history. His hybrid aesthetic introduces contemporary readers to writers and contexts that would otherwise be read separately if at all.

In line with a more textualist analysis, other critical work has accounted for the novel's dynamic play of language. Katherine Birat, taking a deconstructionist approach, considers the novel a commentary on the "textuality of history."[89] By mimicking primary sources, *Cambridge* reveals the extent to which the historical text is a discursive formation. Phillips' novel, she argues, has an "awareness of the process by which worlds are brought into being."[90] Focusing on the slippery nature of linguistic meaning, Birat shows how language in the novel is bound up in a series of alternate and inconsistent meanings, which

---

[87] Caryl Phillips, handwritten draft of a letter to Paul Edwards, undated, in "Cambridge Words and Early Writing," Uncat MSS 15, box no. 10, folder 6, quoted in Lars Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory,* (Amsterdam: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), 72.

[88] Phillips, "Cambridge Words and Early Writing," 72.

[89] Kathie Birat, "Delegated Dominion: Language and Displacement in Cambridge by Caryl Phillips," *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, no. 72, (1997), 27.

[90] Birat, "Delegated Dominion," 27.

demonstrates the unreliability and perhaps inability of language to represent experience. For Emily and Cambridge, familiar language is strained, its applicability to the characters' realities does not quite match up with their experiences. The novel then is about the "metaphorical dimension of displacement as a linguistic phenomenon."[91] According to Birat, this displacement is both spatial and linguistic. The novel is certainly concerned about demonstrating the horror of the slave trade as an embodied experience (for example, through Cambridge's vivid narration or with Emily's fastidious documentation of plantation life).

Phillips' deeply textural descriptions of slavery, specifically his characters' accounts, highlight the extent to which their spatial displacement is also accompanied by symbolic or linguistic uprooting.[92] This issue is also clearly reflected in eighteenth century slave narrative, whose authors were participating in print culture for the first time, ostensibly entering a new discursive universe. This fact is most clearly elaborated in Gates' trope of the talking book wherein ex-slave authors had to make the book speak a new voice, engaging audiences through literary strategies found in sentimental literature, the captivity narrative, and the jeremiad, among others. Phillips seems to focus on the newness and indeterminacy of English in *Cambridge* by littering the text with italicized words that have an ironic, dual function. A closer look at the language throughout the novel underscores that italicized words also function to introduce objects, names, places, and experiences that

[91] Birat, 27.
[92] Birat, 34.

the characters have not encountered before. For example, when he explains how he was captured and put aboard the slave ship, Cambridge writes,

> I must confess, to the shame of my fellow Guinea-men, that I was undoubtedly betrayed by those of my own hue. But it remains true that without instruction and encouragement my native people might never have hardened their hearts and tainted the generous customs of their simple country. Shackled unceremoniously to a fellow unfortunate at both stern and bow, we unhappy *blacks* formed a most miserable traffic.[93]

Cambridge identifies with his fellow captives based on some shared experience in captivity, but also in terms of being fellow countrymen, demonstrated by his referring to them as "fellow Guinea-men" and emphasizing their origins in their respective countries. The italicized, *black*, signals a foreign appellation, one that is racialized and undifferentiated. Though Cambridge himself emphasizes the shared "hue" of those held captive aboard the slave ship, it is not the only nor the most important means of identification for him.

In this section, I have focused on Phillips' technique of historical pastiche. Phillips uses material from slave narratives to mimic and comment upon their author's rhetorical self-making, which is ultimately revised in *Cambridge*. Phillips has also reflected on the extent to which early Black authors were entering into a new discursive context by writing their stories for the first time. He plays with this idea of a new encounter with print culture by italicizing words, showing not only the newness of certain words for Cambridge but also the indeterminacy of meaning.

[93] Phillips, *Cambridge*, 135.

In what follows, I examine how Cambridge engages with the rhetorical strategies of ex-slave authors. I focus on the narratives of Equiano and Gronniosaw and discuss key passages that Phillips references and revises. I then show how Cambridge fashions himself an Englishman and disavows his identity as a Black person. Phillips ultimately leverages his critique of cultural assimilation and respectability politics by satirizing Cambridge's failed attempts to shore up his English identity in the face of a world that is dangerously hostile for people of African descent.

RHETORICAL SELF-MAKING IN CAMBRIDGE AND EARLY SLAVE NARRATIVES

In departure from slave narratives, the fictional author of this section is not interested in the abolitionist goals of other ex-slave authors. Instead, Cambridge is writing this document as the last account of his life before he is executed for a crime. It is a form of testimony prompted by the desire to bear witness to a life lived. Early in the novel, Phillips borrows a key opening passage from *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*. Like Gronniosaw, Olumide—later renamed Cambridge—is captured and sold to a slaver. He is taken to the slave ship, put in chains, and stripped of his gold adornments and jewelry, presumably so that it may be taken and sold. Cambridge writes,

> About my neck I sported a decoration of gold placed there by my mother's own *fair* hand, and from my ears hung larger and less delicate gold pieces of shape, though mercifully not size, resembling orange fruit. These paragons of virtue who had possession of my body, if not my soul, soon divested me of these trappings, thus breaking off my tenderly formed links with my parents.[94]

[94] Phillips, *Cambridge*, 135.

This scene suggests that Olumide relinquishes his family ties and more broadly his ties to Africa. His jewelry is ostensibly his only symbolic tie to his family.

The sense of loss is distinctive in this contemporary passage compared to Gronniosaw's:

> When I left my dear mother, I had a large quantity of gold about me, as is the custom of our country, it was made into rings, and they were linked one into another, and formed into a kind of chain, and so put round my neck, and arms, and legs, and a large piece hanging at one ear, almost in the shape of a pear. I found all this troublesome, and was glad when my new master took it from me — I was now washed, and clothed in the Dutch or English manner.[95]

In Gronniosaw's narrative, this critical scene is preceded by a brief description of his family. Although that description appears truncated and out of place within the narrative, it is an important framing device for the moment during which Gronniosaw relinquishes his gold chain. Gronniosaw, in contrast to Cambridge, is most willing, even "glad" to relinquish his jewelry, finding it "troublesome" to wear. This jewelry is the only vestige of his family that he brings with him, his last memory of home, and a potent symbol of his cultural heritage. No doubt aware of the material and figurative relation between chains and slavery, Gronniosaw describes the gold jewelry as a kind of manacle from which he desired to be free, again, signifying his desire to be free from certain aspects of his African heritage. In lieu of the gold, he dresses himself in English and Dutch styled garb, a representation of a new cultural identity, perhaps more aspirational than real. To

[95] James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* in *Slave Narratives,* eds., William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), 11.

(re)present himself as a human being, Gronniosaw had to construct a version of himself through the written word.[96] Gronniosaw identifies from the very beginning of his narrative as more European in character in order not only to win over his white audiences but to disavow the abject blackness that would otherwise relegate him to non-being status. According to how he frames his narrative, the removal of his jewelry is the final step in a process of distancing himself from Africa.

This distancing technique is built into earlier sections of Gronniosaw's slave narrative and represents a crucial part of the narrating work and rhetorical shaping of his narrative. To distance himself from "ordinary" Africans, Gronniosaw claims noble heritage. He claims that his mother was the daughter of the king of Bournou, the family's city of origin located on the Gold Coast of Africa. He also describes himself as a Christian in all but name. He writes about being able to recognize a single deity, a "Great Man of Power" in the sky."[97] His innate ability to sense that there is only one God further distinguishes him from other non-Christians and most noticeably, his family who continually question his monotheism. In one instance, he tries to convince his mother that there is a God and, after an argument with his father over the matter, is threatened with punishment. After these exchanges, Gronniosaw becomes "dejected and melancholy," losing interest in any diversion.[98]

---

[96] Gates, *Signifying Monkey*,145. Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that formerly enslaved people wrote first and foremost "to demonstrate [their] own membership in the human community."

[97] Gronniosaw, *Narrrative*, 7.

[98] Gronniosaw, 7.

The passage in Gronniosaw's narrative during which he gives away his jewelry demonstrates his relinquishing of African heritage and represents the emergence of a narrative presence that was legible to white audiences. Gronniosaw gives his readers the impression that while slavery itself was an abomination, he was nevertheless fortunate to adopt European cultural values. His decision to leave with the merchant is also framed as a providential event: "I seemed sensible of a secret impulse upon my mind which I could not resist that seemed to tell me I must go."[99] Gronniosaw's strategic plotting of his narrative — specifically, the sense in which his being sold into slavery is fated or inevitable — is enhanced by careful descriptions of his family life and personal characteristics, descriptions that differentiate him from ordinary Africans. His noble status and innate monotheism suggest that he was never meant to reside in Africa — a land of pagans and non-believers according to his descriptions. The narrative sets up a paradox: though his noble status is predicated on his familial lineage and relationship to other Africans, he nevertheless represents his nobility as that which separates him from his heritage. While later decrying the evils of the institution of slavery, Gronniosaw does not question the superiority of European cultural norms. Moreover, his narrative suggests that slavery and his eventual settlement in Europe was always a better alternative than staying in Africa, an assessment that would have gelled with widely circulating assumptions about African inferiority among white reading publics. By naturalizing a valuation of Africa as inferior to Europe and distinguishing himself from other Africans, Gronniosaw is constructing his

[99] Gronniosaw, 8.

narrative voice and naming himself as a reliable author. Gronniosaw, aware of the extent to which Black authorship was subject to doubt, strategically relinquishes a symbol of his African cultural heritage and distances himself from Africa at the outset of his narrative.

Phillips borrows but modifies these strategies. Throughout his neoslave narrative, Cambridge adopts no less than four names; each is central to shaping his self-image. In contrast, Emily Cartwright remains unnamed until the end of the novel. Readers can only relate to her through a narrative "I." These choices in the novel reference the dialectic between identity and representation at play in early slave narratives: while the intentions of white autobiographers could be questioned, "no one could doubt his existence...With the ex-slave, however, it was his existence and identity...that were called into question."[100] James Olney discusses a broad spectrum of autobiographical writing, under which he asserts slave narratives fall. Examining the differences in kind between these modes of writing reveals connections among the themes of self-creation, representation, and narrative voice in the slave narrative.

Ex-slave authors were always working through a dialectic between memory and narration -- remembering past events and then shaping or ascribing meaning to those events from the vantage point of the present. Olney remarks that most slave narratives distinguish themselves from autobiography in a striking manner. In autobiography, the writer's role is to derive meaning and significance from a series of recollected past events. The autobiographer, writes Olney, "is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative

[100] Olney, "I Was Born," 155.

and active shaper" of past events.[101] The role of the author's memory in autobiography is to bring significance to events and discover a pattern into which these events may be organized. The events detailed in the author's life, therefore, are not merely episodic: one event following another in chronological sequence. Instead, the events are resituated in a dialectic of past and present; the author, narrating from the vantage point of the present, pours over memories and makes them meaningful. The autobiography, therefore, may be thought of as "a recollective/narrative act" wherein the writer describes how the past events of her life shaped who she is in the present.[102] Olney distinguishes the authors of slave narratives by explaining that slave and ex-slave authors wish to give the impression that they are not in any way shaping past events; instead, they try to demonstrate that their faculties of memory are merely there to make past events "immediately present to the writer and his reader."[103] The memory functions solely to repeat experience and not to construct it. The hope is to avoid claims that the author has a faulty or unreliable memory or that the author is in some way distorting or falsifying his or her account.

The ex-slave writing about his or her experience of slavery does of course employ memory to shape events; however, the writer will never narrate it in the same way that an autobiographer does. The ex-slave authors' anxieties are also reflected in the composite nature of the texts themselves. Slave narratives often contain within them appended documents to prove the veracity of the author's experience and even to testify to the existence of the author him or herself. They are also often prefaced by an introduction from

[101] Olney, 149.
[102] Olney, 149.
[103] Olney, 150.

white abolitionists or amanuenses as a guarantee that the narrative is authentic. In addition to proclaiming the truth of their narratives, authors also had to establish "the simple, existential claim: 'I exist.'"[104] This fact is corroborated by the overwhelming majority of slave narratives that begin with the basic statement, 'I was born.'

This insistence on the real existence of the narrator of a slave narrative is indeed connected to the desire, on the part of the author, to describe the truth about slavery and bring about its abolition. These authorial strategies also reveal important interconnections among the themes of literacy, identity, and freedom in slave narratives. Bearing in mind the "triangular relationship of narrator, audience, and sponsors," Gronniosaw is working through and shaping the events of his life to give them meaning; yet, he is careful to avoid overt narration of their significance.[105] Gronniosaw, like other slave narrative authors, does not tie all of the events of his life together and describe how they are meaningful. He leaves subtle clues throughout the text to suggest their interconnection and significance. The gold chain passage is the first pivot in his narrative, suggesting he is shedding one identity and adopting another. In borrowing from this passage, Phillips is drawing a connection between Cambridge and questions of European identity, particularly English identity in relation to blackness. Specifically, Phillips points out the rigidity of assimilative modes of representation as found in the “chain of gold” passages.

Phillips makes concrete what is hinted at by Gronniosaw's narrative. By signifying upon it, Phillips suggests that for both men, the gold chain represents their cultural origins.

[104] Olney, 155.
[105] Olney, 154.

Phillips directly references the original interpretation with the phrase "breaking off my tenderly formed links with my parents," suggesting a focus on familial origins rather than exclusively cultural ones. The italicized word *fair* is also one of the more significant modifications made to the contemporary passage. The word "fair," for example, may not refer to Cambridge's mother's pigmentation, but rather her attractive appearance. However, might Cambridge be exploiting the semantic gap in a word whose multiple meanings denote both whiteness and beauty? Could this rhetorical strategy be in line with the narrative strategies of Gronniosaw, a narrator who wants to distance himself from Africa to make himself legible to a predominantly white readership? This early framing device suggests that the central issues of race, representation, and identity in Cambridge's neoslave narrative are being addressed as the problem of blackness in relation to British identity. Phillips is signifying the issues present in emergent Black British writing to explore his protagonist's warring Black and English selves.

In the same way that Phillips destabilizes the meaning of words by italicizing them, he also represents the chain of gold as a symbol with layered and unstable meaning. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the first scholar to discuss Gronniosaw's "veritable signifying chain" considering its cultural significance and religious symbolism.[106] Disposing of the jewelry is a foreshadowing for Cambridge's religious conversion and assimilation to British society. In both the eighteenth century and contemporary narratives, Christian values are coterminous with English ones. Gronniosaw was of course interested in demonstrating the extent to which he shared the same values as those of his white reading public, a move

[106] Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 152.

which ostensibly established him as a credible, trustworthy narrator. In contrast, Cambridge's narrative demonstrates little interest in appealing to a white audience, especially since the narrative is less an anti-abolitionist tract more than it is his final testimony. His efforts at distancing himself from his African heritage have more to do with an inability to reconcile his African identity and his feelings of being English. Too little scholarly attention has been paid to how the novel intersects with and comments on contemporary identitarian questions.

Considering the context out of which then novel emerges, it appears that Phillips draws on Gronniosaw through the voice of Cambridge to foreshadow the tensions of Black British identity, particularly through Cambridge's thwarted desire for belonging in England and his double-consciousness. Kidnapped and sold across the world twice, Cambridge undergoes what Katherine Birat calls symbolic displacement: he is "placed as a signifier in a chain of utterances coming from outside of him."[107] As a Black African, Cambridge represents the constitutive other to the relations of power inhered in imperial discourse. He lies outside of the dominant regimes of representation. His marginality is acutely felt throughout his encounters with people in London and the West Indies. Cambridge's displacement is depicted as a crisis of identification. Throughout the novel, he assumes "different identities at different times [and different places], identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self.'"[108] Unsurprisingly, despite Cambridge's desire for a fully centered self, Phillips treats unified, stable identity as a fantasy, and ultimately Cambridge is

[107] Birat, "Delegated Dominion," 26.

[108] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity, Community, Culture and Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222.

unsuccessful at reconciling his warring selves throughout the novel. Phillips' postmodern perspective on identity is in tension with the objectives of ex-slave authors to represent Black speaking subjects in literature and, at a more basic level, demonstrate the human status of enslaved people. Despite these differences, Cambridge -- as the fictional author of his own narrative -- shares with ex-slave authors the desire to represent the self as autonomous and authentic. While the novel problematizes identity formation, it does not critique the rhetorical self-making that occurs in eighteenth century slave narratives. The novel's purview remains decidedly contemporary.

In what follows, I explore the limits of Cambridge's self-representational strategies. I demonstrate these limits by exploring the issue of naming in the text and the significance of this trope in slave narratives. I also discuss Cambridge's attempts to align himself with Englishness by looking at his relationship with his eventual wife, Anna, as well as his conversion to Christianity. Finally, I turn to the novel's brief focus on communities of free Black Britons. I ultimately show how Cambridge's self-identity as an Englishman does little to ameliorate his existence in England. After all, he is sold back into slavery and eventually dies at the end of his narrative. Phillips emphasizes Cambridge's demise to critique a form of respectability politics that is premised on a form of anti-Black erasure, one that denies the material conditions of Black people in England.

"AN ENGLISHMAN, ALBEIT A LITTLE SMUDGY OF COMPLEXION"

Throughout his narrative, Cambridge's self-image as a Black Englishman is impacted by his displacement and his encounters with new cultural environments in London and the West Indies. Throughout the course of the novel, he is called no less than

four names: Olumide by birth, Tom by his first master, David Henderson upon being baptized, and Cambridge as a slave in the West Indies. Each name change signifies Cambridge's cyclical journey from freedom to enslavement and back again. The different names also represent the multiple dimensions of Cambridge's self-image. The decision about whether to refer to the title as Cambridge, then, is a decidedly complex one for any scholar. There is also a sense in which the title of the novel belies the protagonist's unified identity. Not only is Cambridge a character with multiple selves, but also one with multiple names. However, does ascribing a single name to Cambridge suggests a certain coherence to his identity that is not represented in the text? The difficulty of settling on one name for Cambridge is compounded by a practical necessity of doing so: the ability to discuss or write about the text, at times requires addressing the characters by a single name.

In the context of slave narratives, names functioned as modes of representation and signs of compound, hyphenated identity. This issue is reflected in contemporary scholarship on slave narrative authors, particularly regarding academic work on Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (James Albert) and Frederick Douglass. Peter Jaros, surveying the writing on Equiano, discusses several scholarly strategies for determining these authors' names.[109] Some decide to refer to the author as Equiano because it is the name most people recognize. Others decide Vassa is a more accurate name as evidenced by "his naval records, marriage certificate, and will."[110] The final, and perhaps most awkward naming is Equiano/Vassa, an appellation that suggests the validity of both

[109] Peter Jaros. "Good Names: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa," *The Eighteenth Century* 54, no. 1 (2013): 1-24.

[110] Jaros, 1.

names and recognizes "heterogeneous forms of personhood."[111] Frederick Douglas, whose work is regarded as "the best example, the exceptional case, the supreme achievement" of the first-person, autobiographical slave narrative, also changed his name many times over the course of his life: his birth name, "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey;" the shortened version, "Frederick Bailey" or "Fred;" the name "Stanley" he used while escaping the plantation; and "Frederick Johnson" upon arriving in New York.[112] Finally, in New Bedford he decides to eliminate the last name Johnson, but keeps "Frederick," keeping the only vestige of a name that tied him to his biological family. The authors whose narratives are most present in the novel -- Ukwasaw Gronniosaw (James Albert) and Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) -- engage questions of personhood and self-possession in ways that challenge prevailing assumptions about Black authorship and problematize racial characterizations of human beings. Like these authors, Cambridge goes through a process of voluntary and forced renaming. The issue of Cambridge's double consciousness -- his identity as both a Black African but also an Englishman -- is the primary terrain upon which issues of naming and identity are played out.

Reflecting, but not mirroring, the discursive and literary context out of which figures like Equiano and Gronniosaw write, Phillips queries the possibilities of Black British identity by signifying the trope of naming in slave narratives. When he boards the ship in Africa, Cambridge is called Olumide, and after he departs in London, he is renamed Thomas. Like Equiano, Cambridge, because he does not understand English, is beaten for

[111] Jaros, 3.
[112] Olney, 157.

not answering to his new name. The passages in both texts are nearly identical.[113] Phillips, however, suggests that Cambridge's new name -- bestowed upon him by John Williams, a captain aboard the slave ship -- is interpreted by Cambridge as a sign of superiority. Cambridge explains that Williams "argued most persuasively" that his "condition far outranked" the plight of 'ordinary' slaves.[114] Throughout his narrative, Cambridge describes himself as an exceptional person dealing with extraordinary circumstances. Instead of docking in the Americas and being sold into slavery, for example, Cambridge is informed that he has been conscripted into service by a gentleman in London and that he "was to consider [him]self his domestic, not his slave."[115] These titles reflect a seemingly nominal distinction in Cambridge's status; however, the title and name changes demonstrate how Cambridge is shaping his narrative and self-image, incrementally positioning himself as more English than African. As a domestic servant, Cambridge is not exposed to the arduous work to which African-descended slaves were exposed. Instead, he works in a home with two women: Anna, a white Englishwoman and Mahogany Nell, a Black servant. Within this domestic economy, Cambridge finds equilibrium among the servants, the master, and mistress of the house.

Up until this point in his story, Cambridge's narrative is remarkably like Ignatius Sancho's actual life story. For a substantial portion of his life, Sancho found dignity and

---

[113] Phillips, *Cambridge*, 140: "My captain...rewarded me with a flurry of cuffs when I chose to ignore the title Thomas and wait on Olumide."; Equiano, Olaudah, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, ed. Werner Sollors. (New York: Norton, 2001.) Equiano: "when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff" (64).

[114] Phillips, *Cambridge*, 140-141

[115] Phillips, 141.

some semblance of freedom working for the Montague family for whom he works as a butler and servant. He even marries a Black woman and through his employers' benevolence acquires a grocery store to run. Sancho's marriage to his wife was "one of only two known all-Black marriages recorded during the century."[116] The marked difference in Phillips' novel is Cambridge's marriage to Anna. Cambridge's relationship to a white Englishwoman is equally as important to his performance of Englishness as are his mastery of the English language and conversion to Christianity. As counterpoint to his admiration and devotion to Anna is Cambridge's disdain for Nell. Nell's role as both domestic and sexual servant to her master elicits Cambridge's contempt. She is reviled, especially for rebuking Cambridge's attempts at Christian conversion. The implicit distinction between Anna and Nell is reflected in Cambridge's valuation of white womanhood as virtuous and Black womanhood as its antithesis.

The tension between Cambridge's blackness and his English identity is also apparent in his relation to the other Black British characters in London. In town, he finds to his surprise, a London populated by "Black men occupying all ranks of life."[117] Throughout the city, Cambridge finds he is "haunted" by Black men and women. In comparison to his servant status, these Black British people were relatively free in society, "shielded from the insults of the vulgar." This group of Black British people included "harlots, entertainers, assorted vagabonds" who comprised the lower ranks of society, and in Cambridge's estimation, serve as "fashionable appendage[s]" for rich white Englishmen

[116] Carretta, "Introduction," xii.
[117] Phillips, *Cambridge*. 142.

and women. The busy streets of London were "teeming with a variety" of Black British people, mostly impoverished, people described as "the destitute Blacks."[118] Cambridge does not regard himself as part of this group. He sees them, irrespective of class status, as "little more than undignified objects for [white English people's] mirth and entertainment."[119]

Distancing himself from the free Black Britons, Cambridge identifies as more respectable or dignified. He imbibes the attitude that free Black people in England constitute some kind of problem for polite English society. Indeed, when he is travelling with his wife Anna through the towns of England, he finds "the notorious fop of Bristol, the improperly named Clarence de Quincy."[120] This man is an embarrassment to Cambridge and elicits his ire and shame. He describes de Quincy as the lowest "minion," presenting a "spectacle of novelty."[121] Cambridge feels that he should be humbler since he is dependent on the charity of white Englishman. Instead, de Quincy boasts of his royal African heritage. Worse yet, he mocks Cambridge's religious mission to convert others to Christianity. Cambridge tries to maintain a semblance of his humanity by remaining dignified and respectable according to eighteenth century English standards. His lack of interest in and open disdain for Black British people has as much to do with his own sense of personal worth as it does with resisting as much as possible the life of slavery into which he has been conscripted. Perhaps it is a survival tactic in the face of abject abasement. It

[118] Phillips, 143.
[119] Phillips, 143.
[120] Phillips, 151.
[121] Phillips, 152

certainly reflects a contemporary, assimilationist attitude about 'good' immigrants and harkens forward to the 1988 conservative ad campaign. Phillips casts Cambridge in the role of the assimilated Black Briton as a means of critiquing the racial politics of 1990s England, even though these two contexts are hundreds of years apart.

Phillips's fictional narrator, like the writers Olaudah Equiano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Ignatius Sancho, draws attention to the presence of Black people in Britain before the mass migration waves of the twentieth century. Historical accounts of British history often make peripheral or completely omit the presence of people of African descent in Britain prior to WWII; nevertheless, in addition to Gretchen Gerzila's *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (1995), recently published histories such as Miranda Kaufmann, *The Black Tudors* (2017); Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives* (2008); Onyeka Nubia, *Blackamoores: Africans in Tudor England, Their Presence, Status and Origins* (2013); *England's Other Country Men: blackness in Tudor Society* (2019); and David Olusoga, *Black and British* (2017) have demonstrated that Black people have been in Britain since the Roman invasion.[122] Archeological evidence also suggests that there were Black people living in Britain during the medieval period, Tudor, and later Georgian periods.[123]

Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* appears, for the most part, accurate in its depiction of Cambridge's journey to London, his experiences as a servant, and his descriptions of Black Britons. The influx of Black people in Britain was the result of the Atlantic slave system.

[122] David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2017), 77.

[123] Olusoga, *Black and British*, 77.

Returning plantation owners came back home with inordinate wealth, ready to demonstrate how much they had accrued in the West Indies. Many were used to the lifestyle they had grown accustomed to on their plantations and brought back with them enslaved servants that could wait on them.[124] Some people of African descent also made their way to places like London, Liverpool or Bristol on their own accord, or aboard ships as workers awaiting their next charter.[125] During the eighteenth century, African-descended people were a feature of city life, especially in London but less so in Bristol or Liverpool. All three, of course, were major port cities and powerful trading centers in the transatlantic world and global slave system.

What scholars know about Black people in London is that they permeated all echelons of society. Many connected to well-to-do families, like Cambridge, were sometimes taught to read and write and were even apprenticed. Historian David Olusoga writes that "an unknown number of enslaved Black people in this period seem to have slipped into the very broad and vague category of 'servant,' without any formal recognition or record of that transition."[126] Like Cambridge, those who had come as slaves found that their roles slipped between bondage and freedom more easily in Britain than they did in slave societies in the West Indies, whose ossified social hierarchies were much more entrenched.[127] Still, many Black people lived and then died as slaves in this period. Despite the recorded presence of Black Britons as early as the Roman empire all the way up to the

[124] Olusoga, 165.
[125] Olusoga, 165, 185.
[126] Olusoga, 209.
[127] Olusoga, 165.

eighteenth century, the misconception that immigrants to England appeared after the dissolution of the empire persists. Though Black Britons may have indeed been aware of each other's presence in major cities during the eighteenth century and historical research continues to shed light on their experiences, their writing suggests they often were afforded little in the way of feeling part of British society. Cambridge negotiates the question of British identity by striving to assimilate.

Cambridge's denigration of Black Britons stands in contrast to their representation in the writings of Equiano but are reflective of a more complicated self-representation as depicted in Gronniosaw's narrative In *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano remarks on his encounters with several free people of African descent. While travelling through the Caribbean, he writes,

> I met with many friends, who gave me encouragement to stay there with them…I liked the place extremely and there were some free black people there who were very happy, and we passed our time pleasantly together, with the melodious sound of the catguts, under the lime and lemon trees….I took my leave of New Providence, not without regret.

Equiano's experience of other free Black people is idyllic and positive. In stark contrast to Cambridge, Equiano seems to see something of himself in this community. Equiano's approach to humanizing people of African descent and advocating for the abolition of slavery would involve these kinds of depictions. Gronniosaw's narrative, by contrast, is more complicated in his representation of other Black people he depicts. Though his narrative is also presumably a testament to his own humanity, Gronniosaw aligns himself with values recognizable to white reading publics of his time. Like

Cambridge, for example, Gronniosaw's complicated self-representation is rooted in a strategic disavowal of blackness. He makes it a point to establish that his family thought him loathsome: "my brothers and sisters despised me, and looked on me with contempt…even my servants slighted me." One of his sisters, however, shows him sympathy, and he writes admiringly of her: "I loved her entirely…she was quite white, and fair, with fine light hair though my father and mother were black." Indeed, from Gronniosaw's narrative, he clearly reaffirms what he learns from the world about blackness as a trope of absence.[128]

The major distinction in Cambridge's estimation between himself and the other Black British people and even other white English people is his adherence to a Christian life. Cambridge's Christianity functions as a way to inhere his Englishness to shore it up against those who might mistake him as a slave. He is first introduced to Christianity by John Williams on board the slave ship, and again by Miss Spencer of Blackheath while he lives in London. He takes a renewed interest in the religion after spending time with his beloved Anna and "marveling at her pure and godly thoughts."[129] A significant part of his Christian instruction includes a kind of moral or behavioral education as well as learning how to read and write. In distinction from the ex-slave authors of the autobiographical slave

[128] Gronniosaw, *Narrative*, 11. "…as I was placing the china for tea, my mistress came into the room just as the maid had been cleaning it; the girl had unfortunately sprinkled the wainscot with the mop; at which my mistress was angry; the girl very foolishly answer'd her again, which made her worse, and she call'd upon God to damn her.--I was vastly concern'd to hear this, as she was a fine young lady, and very good to me, insomuch that I could not help speaking to her, "Madam, says I, you must not say so," Why, says she? Because there is a Black man call'd the Devil that lives in hell, and he will put you in the fire and burn you."

[129] Phillips, *Cambridge,* 143.

narratives, Phillips is less interested in spending time discussing the revolutionary capacities of literacy. What Cambridge focuses on is his desire to "imbibe the spirit and imitate the manners of Christian men" and anchoring an identity that would otherwise be in flux.[130] Literacy and - perhaps more importantly - the adoption of Christian values represents a turning point in Cambridge's narrative. These passages recall Olaudah Equiano's conversion and eventual baptism by Miss Guerins. The passages that document Equiano's assimilation into British society describe an eager and willing pupil of English language and customs: "I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood everything that was said. I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen but relished their society and manners."[131] Equiano refashions himself as an Englishman, reinforcing his articulation of identity by learning to read and converting to Christianity. Like Sancho, Equiano's public status inflected his rhetorical choices, particularly as someone invested in being the Black spokesperson for abolition. Therefore, his investments in Christianity and his own baptism are debatable. As a counterpoint to Equiano and Sancho, Cambridge appears for the most part, sincere and uncritical in his desire to become English.

A major component of Cambridge's Christian education includes shedding his unwanted identity, what Cambridge calls his "uncivilized African demeanour."[132] Miss Spencer encourages him to divest himself of any affinity or attachment to Africa. A

[130] Phillips, 143.

[131] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself*, ed. Brycchan Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018), 132.

[132] Phillips, *Cambridge,* 144.

modified version of the curse of Ham is also used to support the inherent sinfulness of African people and people of African descent. In Miss Spencer's Bible class, Cambridge is taught that Noah's son, Cham (Ham), was "damned by God for his disobedience" after he had relations with Noah's chosen wife on the Ark.[133] The byproduct of this transgression was "the devilish dark Chus (Canaan), the father of the Black and cursed Africans."[134] Miss Spencer's warped version of Biblical events suggests that, while neither Cham nor Noah's chosen wife were Black, their sinful act produced blackness. Her story imbues the curse of Ham with a concrete representation of the relation among sexual depravity, transgressive behavior, and blackness. The Christian ethos Miss Spencer teaches is a version of Englishness whose counterpoint or constitutive other is blackness.

Part of his religious conversion, foreshadowed early in his narrative, includes the rejection of his African heritage. When Cambridge officially converts to Christianity, he is given a new name, "banished was Black Tom, and newly born...David Henderson." Reflecting the biblical language of rebirth, David Henderson is reborn as an Englishman. Like Gronniosaw, he washes himself of African heritage and vests himself in new garb literally and metaphorically. His marriage to Anna and decision to commit himself to the abolitionist cause only deepen his sense of a new identity: "Truly I was now an Englishman, albeit a little smudgy of complexion! Africa spoke to me only of a history I had cast aside."[135] The David Henderson version of Cambridge represents in more ways than one the man described in the Conservative campaign ad and resonates with Gronniosaw's point

[133] Phillips, 144.
[134] Phillips, 144.
[135] Phillips, 147.

of view. David Henderson is an English name given to an individual who has rejected identifying with his cultural heritage and instead has embraced a system of values he feels will afford him the most respect -- that will give him a dignified way of life in the context of eighteenth-century England. Englishness is constitutive of Christian values. According to the text Phillips writes, they are one and the same. Therefore, when Henderson talks about being a Christian missionary, he is just espousing the values of the empire.

Considering his travels and experiences with other white people in England, however, Henderson displays an awareness of his own predicament:

> We [people of African descent] … occupy a superior and free status in England, although an unsatisfactory reluctance to invoke the just English law permits the outward appearance of slavery to be enacted by some persons. This creates in the mind of many true Englishman a confusion as to the proper standing of the Black people in their presence.[136]

While he may be unsympathetic for a contemporary audience, Henderson understands Englishness beyond its racial or ethnic demarcation. The passage echoes the rebuke given by Equiano in his narrative, calling to account "O'ye nominal Christians!"[137] In his estimation, those born in England not following a Christian way of life, most especially proponents of slavery, are not necessarily truly English: "it appeared that these *countrymen* had little interest in recognizing or relishing the negro on terms of equality."[138] Henderson's doubleness and the extent to which he tries to compartmentalize his identities are also tempered by a recognition of the limits of assimilationist politics. In the context of bondage and the looming threat of other forms of violence, Cambridge's identity as an

[136] Phillips, 147.
[137] Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative,* 87.
[138] Phillips, *Cambridge,* 151.

Englishman and not a Black Guinean is perhaps strategic, a form of assimilation as a means of self-protection. Though he eventually goes abroad to travel the abolition lecture circuit, Cambridge's innate sense of his own superiority distinguishes him from Equiano in his quest. Whereas Equiano demonstrates in his narrative a sense of sincere sympathy with the plight of enslaved human beings, Cambridge is driven by a learned paternalism, a perspective that blunts his goodwill and makes him appear a bit ridiculous.

Coming to terms with Cambridge's unreliability as a narrator reveals the critique at the heart of the novel and gives us purchase on the kinds of identitarian issues at stake. Throughout his narrative, Cambridge effortfully massages out the contradictions of his identities, a move that suggests unease with the diverse social and cultural positions he occupies. His anti-blackness, because of his assimilationist attitude, is highlighted as all the more absurd in an eighteenth-century context and serves as a useful way to critique the vision of racial and national cohesion promoted in the moralistic discourses of conservative politics. The novel demonstrates that Cambridge, like the other Black characters towards whom he feels superior, is subject to racial violence regardless. In the context of the 1990s, the kinds of racial violence to which Black British people were subject are also inflected by anti-Black racism and white supremacy. In part, Phillips's critique is targeted at hegemonic regimes of representation that flatten out and misrepresent Black British subjects. Its primary objective is to represent and undermine what Hall refers to as "the essentialized Black subject"[139] These regimes of representation have a constitutive,

[139] Hall, *New Ethnicities,* 443.

formative role in the makeup of cultural and political life.[140] Part of the work *Cambridge* is invested in, then, is undermining the relationship or correlation between race, ethnicity, and nationalism around which English identity has been constructed.

[140] Hall, 443.

Chapter 2: Octavia Butler's Kindred and Black Feminist Strategies of Survival

INTRODUCTION

Octavia Butler, who came of age during the rise of the Black Power and Civil Rights era, cites her family history and her experiences with the Black nationalist movement as the genesis of her ideas for *Kindred.* In interviews she describes an encounter she had while attending community college, an encounter in which a young man criticizes older generations of African Americans:

> ...I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age as I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, 'I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long'....When he said *us* he meant Black people, and when he said *old people*, he meant older Black people.[141]

In interviews, Butler says that this encounter reminded her of the resentment she used to have as a young girl toward her mother, a domestic worker. She begins writing *Kindred* to imagine what it would be like to send a person from her own generation back to the time of slavery. She also discusses wanting to work out or as she says "resolve" the feelings of shame she had as a child about the limited kinds of choices her mother, grandmother, and even great-grandmother had to make in a context of oppression.

Though she grew up in California, Butler's family had roots in the South, specifically in Louisiana where Butler's mother and grandmother picked cotton for a living.

[141]Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 51.

As Butler notes, "it wasn't that far removed from slavery."[142] She describes her mother's life as circumscribed by the difficult choices Black families and Black women, in particular, had to make to survive. For example, instead of completing school her mother had to leave at a young age because as the eldest, it was expected that she help support her family financially. Her grandmother worked several physically demanding jobs as a domestic for white families, dying an early death in her fifties. Describing these circumstances as slavery in all but name, Butler notes that basic difference between the matriarchs in her family and enslaved women was that "[her grandmother and mother] could leave, which eventually they did."[143] Butler's mother settled in California, and as a child Butler sometimes had to accompany her to work where she served as housekeeper to white families. There, Butler witnessed the racist treatment to which her mother was subjected. Butler describes how as a child she resented her mother for seeming to accept this humiliating treatment and being complicit in the racism of her white employers. In retrospect, however, Butler understood that her mother's difficult choices -- to work and put up with the abuse of her white employers -- were a matter of survival to provide a life for her family, particularly her children at a time when the options for Black women were limited in virtually all respects. This encounter -- which got Butler thinking about her own family history -- was generative for the production of *Kindred,* a novel that challenges contemporary readers' assumptions about Black women's self-determination, and resistance efforts in the era of slavery and beyond.

[142]Randall Kenan, "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler." Callaloo14, no. 2 (1991): 496.
[143] Kenan, 496.

The idea that Black women, especially those working in the domestic sphere, were apolitical and therefore complicit in structures of white supremacy was baked into discourses of slavery and to some extent, the Black Power Movement (BPM), the time during which *Kindred* was composed.[144] Historian Ashley D. Farmer highlights how prior to and during BPM the political identity of the Black domestic worker was maligned and erased, "steeped in the ideal of the 'docile' mammy figure and entrenched in the legacy of slavery."[145] As Patricia Hill Collins observes, the mammy figure is a convenient "controlling image" that ignores the intersecting gender, class, and racial oppression to which Black women are subject. The mammy image is a product of slavery and a representation of a domestic worker who nurtures and loves the members of her white employer's family to the detriment of her own, normalizing the relegation of Black women to the realm of domestic work. The mammy symbolizes the "dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power" by enshrining servitude and obedience as positive values. Of course, as Butler mentions, for reasons of economic survival, Black women sometimes had to strategically adopt the role of mammy to work and provide for themselves and their families.

In *Kindred*, the antebellum South is a context that underscores the "boundedness" of Black women's choices and complicates resistance as it is traditionally understood.[146]

---

[144] Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 21.

[145] Farmer, 21.

[146] Nadine Flagel, "'It's Almost Like Being There': Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's Kindred," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2012): 216-45.

Through Dana's experiences in the past, Butler critiques traditional ideas about revolt, self-determination, and free will. Escape and other forms of visible, organized rebellion are typically taken to represent the agency of enslaved people. Butler demonstrates, however, that through covert and creative means, Black domestic bondswomen were able to assert their personhood and refuse the conditions of their enslavement. Certainly, there have been attempts made to envision the work of Black domestic workers as overtly resistant. Butler, however, is less interested in establishing the revolutionary capacity of Black women in this regard. Dana, like the man Butler encountered at her community college, does not have much sympathy for the Black bondswomen and the impossible choices they make until she herself must do so. Through documenting how the context of enslavement complicates Dana's choices, Butler exposes the ways in which assumptions about Black women's complicity, docility, and subservience to white power structures not only mask their own exploitation but also their creative resistance efforts.

Though Butler was not personally involved in the Black Power Movement (BPM), she mentions that the movement informed some of Dana's attitudes about free will and self-determination. Like the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s reflected a desire among Black Americans for autonomy and freedom. It signaled "the determination of Black people to define and liberate themselves."[147] Community organizing and collective action by and for Black communities were features of this kind of political self-determination. BPM also emphasized the rejection of racist ideology and institutions through revolt and through the creation of new systems of

[147] Bell, "The Contemporary Afro-American Novel, 1: Neorealism," 236.

meaning and structures in its place. In terms of collective action, BPM defined itself as a movement of overt, hyper-visible political action. Often the discourse around this movement privileged the political roles of men over women. This does not mean, however, that Black women were not involved in protest efforts. Dana's attitudes about agency and complicity reflect BPM discourses that value visible forms of resistance. However, Butler ultimately critiques these attitudes as ones that are limited in their capacity for envisioning realistic means that Black women used to undermine conditions of enslavement. Because women rebelling through escape were subject to torture and sexual violence, they found more subtle and creative means of resistance, ones we might describe using Fred Moten's language about fugitivity: "flight within containment." In *Kindred,* the women on the plantation rebel in various ways; often the more covert and subtle forms of resistance are the most successful.

Butler's interest in reimagining Black women's roles in resistance efforts is part of a larger political project of redefining Black womanhood, one that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly through representations of the domestic worker. Political leaders and activists rearticulated the Black domestic laborer by undermining perceptions of her as weak, complicit in perpetuating systems of inequality, and marginal to political movements for enfranchisement.[148] These investments in the domestic worker were part of a larger identity shift in which "Black women collectively constructed ideas about how women should articulate and express their political and philosophical leanings."[149] This

[148] Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 32.

[149] Farmer, 1. Predating the BP movement of the 1970s and 1980s, women who organized from the 1940s to 1960s also took up the identity of the Black domestic worker as a central figure

articulation of the domestic worker as politically engaged had to do with Black women activists' political conviction that the intersecting issues of race, class, and gender were well-represented in that identity.[150] Her interests, for example, directly intersected with struggles for "Black self-determination, self-defense, and separate Black cultural and political institutions."[151]

This move to reconfigure the domestic laborer "in the gendered imaginary" of BP discourse is an intervention that offers a corrective to representations of Black women that diminish their forms of care, survival, and resistance.[152] By focusing on care work, Butler outlines a rubric of domestic women's resistance efforts that undermine superficial distinctions between assimilation and resistance and are often overlooked. In the context of *Kindred*, I am using the term care to refer to a set of practices that are driven by empathy and compassion. Taking up Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese's theorization, care is radical in contexts of deprivation, when individuals, groups or communities are rendered dispensable, and their survival is habitually imperiled by "state-sanctioned violence." Collective acts of care are radical because these acts of self-preservation undermine power structures that inhere systems of inequality. Bondswomen in the novel are daring in their acts of providing care to survive the very conditions that threaten their existence. And, by challenging these conditions, they refuse the terms of their own subjection.

---

to articulate a vision of the "Black working-class women as the vanguard of Black Americans' self-deterministic pursuits."

[150] Farmer, 21.

[151] Farmer, 21.

[152] Farmer, 22.

The novel meditates on the radical dimensions of domestic labor. Radical care as praxis emerged with an awareness of the "gendered power dynamics embedded within 'women's work.'"[153] The idea of radical care took hold during the 1960s and 1970s as communal health became an integral way to combat conditions of "racism, sexism, colonialism, classism, and homophobia."[154] The most famous example of this is probably the Black Panther free breakfast program and their free clinics for community members. These are acts that "have aimed to fill in the gaps between structural breakdown, failure, and neglect."[155]

Still, Dana's efforts to rebel are not construed as heroic in the novel. Instead, the choices she makes oscillate *between* "accommodation and resistance."[156] At times, Dana is or appears to be complicit in the structures of domination that would see her great-great grandmother Alice and other bondspeople harmed. At other times, she succeeds in her mission of securing her own survival and the survival of her ancestors. Representations of rebellion as heroic are bound up in a language that flattens out the complexities of circumstance. And, the language of free will, agency, and self-determination makes less visible the forms of resistance that lie at the interstices between complicity and resistance.

Rather than framing care work as a practice of resistance, I take up Tina Campt's theorization of refusal to articulate how Black women's radical care work intervenes in

---

[153] Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times," *Social Text*, 38, no. 1 (2020): 6.

[154] Hobart and Kneese, 6.

[155] Hobart and Kneese, 5.

[156] Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2004), 1.

undermining conditions of dispossession. For Campt, refusal describes a rejection of "a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; [a] decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented."[157] Campt distinguishes also between acts and practices. Practices of refusal -- as opposed to say collective acts of protest -- are often disguised by "repetition, routine, or internalization" and require that we adjust our modalities of apprehension in order to render them legible.[158] In opposition to overt opposition, individual transgressions, and collective resistance, practices of refusal appear "pervasive and ever-present, yet [are] occluded by [their] seeming" commonplaceness."[159] These are practices of refusal that enact what Tina Campt would call a tense of Black feminist futurity. Campt says:

> For me it is crucial to think of futurity through a notion of tense. What is the tense of a Black feminist future? ….A tense relationship to an idea of possibility that is neither innocent nor naive, nor is it necessarily heroic or intentional. It's humble and strategic. It's subtle and discriminating. Its devious and exacting. It's not always loud and demanding. It's frequently quiet, opportunistic, dogged, and disruptive.160

Campt discusses a definition of futurity that moves beyond the future tense as simply meaning "that which will happen."[161] Instead, she emphasizes a "grammar of possibility" for Black feminist futurity that locates the future in a tense called "future real conditional, that which will have had to happen for a future to be built."[162] Black feminist

---

[157] Tina Campt, "Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity," Barnard Center for Research on Women, October 7, 2014, video, 1:55:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ozhqw840PU.

[158] Campt, "Black Feminist Futures."

[159] Campt, "Black Feminist Futures."

[160] Campt, "Black Feminist Futures."

[161] Campt, "Black Feminist Futures."

[162] Campt, "Black Feminist Futures."

futures "envision that which is not, but must be."[163] These practices enact future possibilities of freedom in present moments of dispossession. The use of the subjunctive mood, here, expresses "wished-for, tentatively assumed, or hypothetical states of affairs."[164] This grammar of possibility (living as though one were free) is another way in which Butler undermines linear notions of time.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing how Butler creates conditions of constraint that mirror the experiences of bondspeople in the antebellum South. I identify the Weylin plantation as a "geography of confinement" where the mobility of bondspeople is policed by plantation owners, slave drivers, and even bondspeople themselves. I show that against these conditions of constraint, Dana and other slaves create "rival geographies" that provide limited means for self-determination and even resistance. These forms of resistance are covert and may not be immediately discernable as such. This core ambivalence about complicity and resistance is at the heart of Butler's critique. I examine the forms of resistance available to Dana and other bondswomen. These forms of resistance enact the possibilities of fugitivity, waywardness, and practices of refusal over and above more visible forms of resistance. Finally, I examine what purchase *Kindred* might have on our present political moment by showing how it is a document for queer Black women's organizing in the Black Lives Matter era.

[163] Campt, "Black Feminist Futures."

[164] Wikipedia, "English Subjunctive," last modified July 9, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_subjunctive.

PLANTATION GEOGRAPHIES: RECREATING CONDITIONS OF CONSTRAINT

Kindred begins a few weeks before the U.S. bicentennial. The year is 1976, and Dana, a 26-year-old Black woman, is moving into a new apartment with her white husband, Kevin. Suddenly, Dana succumbs to a disorienting dizziness and blacks out. When she awakens, she finds that she is in antebellum Maryland. Inexplicably, Dana —occasionally with her husband — time travels back and forth from contemporary L.A. to nineteenth century Maryland. On each trip, she finds she must intervene to save a young plantation owner's son, Rufus Weylin, from several life-threatening situations. To survive the time of slavery, Dana must pass under the radar as a slave and navigate precarity at each turn. Her ultimate mission, she learns, is to ensure the union of Rufus and Alice, a bondswoman who happens to be Dana's great-great-grandmother.

The novel's engagement with July 4, 1776, reminds readers of the unfulfilled promise, "all men are created equal."[165] The bicentennial of the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence is a date that haunts the novel; it is only ever mentioned indirectly. When Kevin meets Rufus, he pulls out change to show Rufus that he is from the future, the coin he pulls out is a "bicentennial quarter" which indicates two dates: 1776 and 1976. Beyond this passage, the only other mention of 1776 is on Dana's final trip to the past. Dana remarks that "with some kind of reverse symbolism," Rufus summons her back to the plantation on July 4, 1776.[166] The inextricable link between Dana's narrative on the Weylin plantation and Dana's existence in the present also demonstrates how slavery

[165] Sarah Eden Schiff, "Recovering (from) the Double: Fiction as Historical Revision in Octavia E. Butler's Kindred," *Arizona Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2009): 115.

[166] Butler, *Kindred*, 243.

impinges on the present moment. As Levecq comments "the novel stages a hovering between event and memory, raw encounter and retelling, reality and textuality."[167] Like all neoslave narratives, *Kindred* demonstrates the extent to which forms of bondage and the power dynamics at play are never simply part of the past.

Within the parameters of this containment, Dana finds new and subtle ways of resisting oppressive conditions and even creates fleeting moments of freedom. The grandfather paradox, another of the novel's speculative fiction elements, creates conditions of constraint that supplement the physical and psychological transformation Dana undergoes on the Weylin plantation. According to the grandfather paradox, if a time traveler alters anything significant about her ancestry in the past like killing a direct ancestor, then she imperils her own life in the present. The paradoxical element is that if she does not exist in the present (as a result of having killed her ancestor when she time travelled to the past), "then [s]he can't have visited the past and have killed said" ancestor in the first place.[168] The "grandfather paradox" facilitates Butler's engagement with issues of "free will and determinism."[169] Nadine Flagel characterizes the grandfather paradox as a "masculinist speculative fiction term;" however, for the purposes of this study, I want to problematize this usage and suggest using instead "grandmother" paradox. After all, novel is much more attuned to the violent legacies of slavery in relation to Dana and the bondswomen on the plantation.

---

[167] Christine Levecq,"Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's 'Kindred,'" *Contemporary literature* 41, no. 3 (2000): 527.

[168] Flagel, "'It's Almost Like Being There,'" 220.

[169] Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 108-109.

Dana realizes her purpose early in the novel. To survive, she must make sure Rufus lives long enough so that he and Alice can produce Hagar, her own great-grandmother. This time conundrum forces Dana to make some difficult and at times horrifying choices to secure her own survival and that of her ancestors. Throughout the novel, the time loop ensnares Dana in "cycles of determined repetition."[170] Because she must save Rufus to secure her own survival, Dana cannot act as freely as someone who does not know the future. Of course, Dana's free will is curbed also by the unpredictably violent conditions of slavery. In other words, Dana's freedom is constrained because surviving as a slave in the antebellum south means confronting precarity at each turn.

Butler's unromanticized depiction of resistance and complicity in the Antebellum South is reflected in historical scholarship on enslavement, which has documented how bondspeople "were many things at once, and they were many things at different moments and in various places."[171] Stephanie Camp's seminal text, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South,* illuminates the role of everyday resistance in the lives of slave women by exploring the slippages between accommodation and resistance. By everyday resistance, Camp references the "everyday forms of resistance -- hidden or indirect expressions of dissent, quiet ways of reclaiming a measure of control over goods, time, or parts of one's life."[172] Because these practices existed in the interstices between open opposition and consent, Camp turns our attention to "everyday, private, concealed, even intimate worlds" to explore the myriad forms of resistance in plantation

[170] Rose, *Alien Encounters*, 108-109
[171] Camp, *Closer to Freedom,* 1.
[172] Camp, 2.

spaces. Exploring this gray area is important to undermine what she describes as the "accommodation versus resistance" narrative in contemporary historiography on slavery. This work also demonstrates that visible, documented instances of armed rebellion and successful escape from the plantation were not the only means of revolt.[173] What's more, these more visible forms of resistance were often carried out by men (armed, organized revolt, escape, etc.). Women also resisted bondage through everyday practices. The extent to which enslaved individuals existed in these gray areas is evident in the many covert, under-documented forms of resistance in plantation spaces.[174]

For Dana, everyday practices of resistance are more successful than overt, individual acts of rebellion because the Weylin plantation functions as a "geography of containment" that limits and surveils its bondspeople. Camp characterizes plantation spaces as "geographies of containment" because slave owners, overseers, and legal institutions regulated the "physical and social mobility of enslaved people."[175] The mobility of slaves in the antebellum south was constricted and policed by force: "More than any other single activity -- such as trading, learning to read, consuming alcohol, acquiring poisoning techniques, or plotting rebellions -- slave movement was limited, monitored, and criminalized."[176] Anxieties about Black mobility, for example, produced laws that simultaneously prohibited enslaved people from owning any weapons and leaving

[173] Camp, *Closer to Freedom* 1.
[174] Camp, 3.
[175] Camp, 13.
[176] Camp, 15.

plantations without a pass.[177] These laws also had "temporal and spatial" dimensions.[178] Many slave passes designated a specific period of absence during which slaves were permitted to leave. Others stipulated that the person leaving the plantation follow and not deviate from a specific route laid out by slave owners and managers.

Within the confines of the plantation household Dana can create short-term and limited moments of freedom. Early in the novel, Dana believes that she might be able to exert her influence on Rufus to gain his trust and protection. Her success at doing so allows her to avoid specific tasks. On other occasions, she self-selects her own tasks so that she can some time with her husband Kevin: Dana spends extra time doing tasks like fetching logs to start his fire and carrying water up the stairs for his bath. She talks about her work as essentially being "jobs I had assigned myself" which she says "gave me legitimate reason for going in and out of Kevin's room at all hours, and they kept me from being assigned more disagreeable work."[179] The work that Sarah, a domestic bondswoman, has to do includes intimate forms of labor that are crucial to the functioning of the plantation family, including cooking, washing, cleaning and providing meals for her own family. Dana and Sarah work together throughout the novel, since Sarah is the one who essentially runs the plantation household. This privilege provides her a modicum of freedom in comparison to the other enslaved people working on the plantation. Nevertheless, Dana's choice is limited by the unwritten rules of the plantation household. Margaret Weylin for example monitors the home and interrogates Dana about her whereabouts. Dana tells the

[177] Camp, 13.
[178] Camp, 15.
[179] Butler, 92.

truth about being “In Mr. Franklin’s room” at night, not bothering “to lie because all the house servants knew. It might have even been one of them who alerted Margaret.”[180] Butler demonstrates here that the geography of containment is also policed from within the bondspeople’s community, adding another layer of surveillance over slave mobility. Dana’s suspicions about being watched by the other bondspeople are confirmed when her only attempt to flee the plantation is foiled by a slave on the plantation who sees Dana abscond in the early morning hours. What Margaret Weylin and even the other bondspeople at times make clear is that the plantation household, in addition to being a workplace, was also "a field of power relations and political practices."[181]

By giving shape to the policed dimensions of plantation geography, *Kindred* begins to challenge escape as the only means of rebellion. Escape – permanently leaving the plantation – is a dominant trope of both the slave narrative and scholarship on the writings of enslaved or formerly enslaved people; as a result, this form of resistance has been characterized as representative of a form of freedom. As Butler illustrates, however, even space outside of the Weylin plantation is not necessarily a haven. The geography of containment in *Kindred* is regulated not only by the Weylins and bondspeople but also by others on the perimeter of the plantation. The borders around the plantation are policed through sheer violence, and beyond the immediate boundaries of the plantation, there are other hazards. Dana and Alice both encounter and describe patrol dogs, which have the power to maim. As Dana travels on paths adjacent to but outside of the plantation she is

[180] Butler, 93.

[181] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: the Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

always alert to slave patrollers. On her first visit to Alice, for example, she is violently accosted by two men, one of whom attempts to rape her. The patrollers encounter Dana as a foreigner, not recognizing her as one of the slaves they have seen before on the Weylin premises. In answer to the question "who are you?" Dana responds indignantly, "What are *you* doing here?"[182] Dana does not realize that she has violated the contained geography of the plantation and that she has no right in their view to occupy the space outside of their surveillance.

RIVAL GEOGRAPHIES AND PRACTICES OF REFUSAL

Kindred draws our attention to forms of resistance that challenge paradigms of free-will and self-determination by showing that within spaces of dispossession and containment, creative, everyday practices of resistance were also possible. Considering the dynamics of the plantation space, fleeing slavery was nearly impossible to achieve; therefore, Dana begins to engage in covert and subtle practices of refusal. Historical evidence of these practices is scarce. Because these acts relied on concealment, it is difficult to estimate how much actual resistance was happening in plantation spaces. Most primary sources that document enslaved people were written by white slaveowners, and while there are slave narratives written by a handful of women, there is much left out of the archival record about the day-to-day experiences and survival strategies of bondswomen. Deborah Gray White notes that the archive demonstrates that the "female slave's world was peripheral" that her existence was only significant if she was involved in the activities of

[182] Butler, *Kindred*, 41.

bondsmen or slaveowners: "few sources illuminate the interaction of slave women in their private world."[183] These subtle acts of resistance were also less visible because women secretly carried them out sometimes also within the domestic realm. For example, women would often temporarily flee the plantation, engaging in truancy or absenteeism. Women would abscond the plantation temporarily to visit relatives, friends or be alone in the wilderness. There are even cases of individuals who were able to negotiate the terms of their return with slave owners eager to have them resume work on plantations. Missing work, of course, slowed the pace of plantation labor. Even if slaves were unable to physically leave plantation spaces, there were other ways of refusing, including performing tasks at a deliberately slower pace as a form of dissidence. Women working outside of the house also broke tools, let livestock deteriorate, and slowed their work down. Because some women had access to the food supply of their masters, some also stole food, "sabotaged their owners' meals" and there are even cases in which they poisoned their masters.[184]

For Dana, temporary and limited forms of flight and escape only happen in the context of containment. Dana creates a "rival geography" against the plantation geography of containment when she plots against the Weylins and discusses with Kevin how they are going to survive, escape, and blend in as slave and slaveowner.[185] For example, Kevin's

[183] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 23.

[184] Amani Marshall, "Resistance," in *Enslaved Women in America: An Encyclopedia.* eds. Diana Ramey Berry and Deleso A. Alford (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012), 272.

[185] Camp, *Closer to Freedom,* 7. Camp borrows this term from the work of Edward Said as cited in Godlewska and Smith, ''Introduction: Critical Histories of Geography,'' in Geography and Empire , 7– 8

room becomes a refuge for Dana during her time at the plantation. It is only under the guise of a dutiful slave that she can attain any privacy and respite. The cookhouse is also a space of relative freedom. In similar fashion to the slave narratives, Dana begins to teach the enslaved children how to read in secret. This is a rare moment where Dana appears to do something outside of her immediate survival. These moments are rare because it takes so much of Dana's energy to perform her role as docile slave and negotiate the terms of her confinement with Rufus. Teaching the children on the plantation how to read is an offense punishable by violence, and Dana takes on great risk in agreeing to do this for Nigel and Carrie: "If anything went wrong, there would be Blacks to take their revenge on me when the whites finished."[186] The lessons must occur under cover in the cookhouse. The cookhouse is out of sight of the slave owning family. It is a place on the plantation where bondspeople can be left relatively alone.

Dana’s insinuation into the slave community is part of a technique of subterfuge, hiding and protecting her authentic identity to gain the loyalty of the Weylins who act as an immediate physical threat. As in early slave narratives, subterfuge plays a part in Dana's ability to survive without physical harm on the Weylin plantation. At first, she must play the part of Kevin's slave when Kevin, by mistake, travels to the past with Dana. When they are first introduced to Mr. Weylin, they account for Dana's modern accent by saying she is from New York. Kevin supplements this story, convincing Tom Weylin that he is a writer from New York who had purchased Dana because of her ability to read and write. Kevin

[186] Butler, 106.

must also disguise his marriage to Dana. To convince Mr. Weylin that he is a slave owner like any other, Kevin suggests that he plans to trick Dana into going South to Louisiana where he can sell her for a good price before returning North. Donning this monstrous persona, Kevin is "trying to find the humanity in [Weylin]" to assess whether it was at all safe for Dana should she ever be separated from Kevin in the future and left alone on the plantation.[187] Though Butler did not specifically consult the narrative of Ellen Craft, Dana, and Kevin's techniques of blending in most closely mirror the strategies Craft deployed. In her famous slave narrative, Craft describes how she was able to disguise herself as a white man to escape bondage. She acquired men's clothes and bound her right hand to feign injury and provide an excuse for being unable to sign her name or write. Additionally, Craft bound up her face with a cloth that cupped her chin and covered her ears, a disguise of injury to hide her feminine features. Later, Ellen also feigned deafness so that she did not have to engage in conversation with other white travelers.

This technique of subterfuge or masking -- what are sometimes referred to as "dissembling techniques" -- was a common practice of bondspeople.[188] Women in particular, "imparted these survival skills" to their immediate family members, especially to children so that they could survive and resist[189] In order to pass under the radar of racist white authority and survive precarious conditions, bondspeople employed masking as a covert strategy of resistance. The trope of masking, perhaps most famously treated in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask" (1895), has been a common way to talk

[187] Butler, 80.
[188] Marshal, "Resistance," 276.
[189] Marshal, "Resistance," 276.

about forms of Black survival that involve outward appearances of obsequious behavior, contentment, and even happiness in the context of white supremacist societies. As Paul Gilroy notes, masking and mimicry were "performance skills" that were "tactical as well as playful; contestatory as well as compensatory."[190] The dissembling tactics of masking that Dana employs are strategic and necessary for survival in the context of the Antebellum South. They also skirt the line between "resistance and accommodation." This is perhaps the most important aspect of the everyday practices of refusal that Dana enacts. The decisions she makes to survive and for her ancestors to have a future require that she play into stereotypes and even become complicit in furthering the interests of those who enslave her. This ambivalence is at the core of Butler's response to a discourse that would otherwise dismiss the resistance efforts of Black women both during the time of slavery and in more contemporary periods.

Even though she is in the past for only a few weeks, Dana finds herself surprised to learn how easy it is to become comfortable with the roles she and Kevin have created for themselves. While hiding their married status, Dana and Kevin struggle to find time together. Particularly, they struggle with not being able to sleep in the same room at night. Kevin is disturbed to find that Dana must sleep on bare cots with hay for a cushion. They resolve to stay in the same room even if they get caught. Dana remarks, "Weylin knew what kind of relationship Kevin was supposed to have with me, and he didn't care."[191]

---

[190] Paul Gilroy, "…'To Be Real': The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture," *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance,* ed. Catherine Ugwu. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 16.

[191] Butler, 82.

Weylin believes Kevin to be the kind of sexually exploitative slave owner that Weylin is himself. Only by playing into these roles are Dana and Kevin able to access intimacy in their relationship. One morning, when Dana leaves Kevin's room, she awkwardly encounters Mr. Weylin, who gives her a knowing smile. Dana is disturbed by how normalized her sexual exploitation, as it appears to Weylin, is in the household. If she feared being kicked out, "it wouldn't be for doing a thing as normal as sleeping with my master….happily playing the whore for my supposed owner."[192] Without meaning to, she exploits Weylin's assumptions about bondswomen as property and ideas about their sexuality. Dana reflects, with disgust, that Weylin thought it perfectly "normal" that a bondswoman be exploited sexually by her master. Dana and Kevin's relationship is accepted because it reinforces the gendered and racial hierarchies on the plantation between master and slave.

Dana and Kevin's relationship as a mixed-race couple is fraught given the inheritances of white male sexual violence against Black women. Deborah Gray White documents the relationship between "sensuality and fecundity" in tracing the genesis of these inheritances. She writes that, economically, the plantation relied on the natural increase of the slave population, rather than the direct purchasing of bondspeople. The "increase of the slave population" in this context was interpreted as and "seemed to be evidence of the slave woman's lust"[193] White points out how reproduction was a matter of public conversation and that "people accustomed to speaking and writing about the

[192] Butler, 97.
[193] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 31.

bondwoman's reproductive abilities could hardly help associating her with licentious behavior"[194] Additionally, the context in which women were purchased on auction blocks, particularly the ways in which their bodies were assessed, exposed and handled to determine their physical abilities both for work and reproduction also bolstered these misconceptions about bondswomen.[195] The same can be said about the violence to which bondswomen were exposed.

Most attempts to resist sexual assault ended very badly. This challenge to bondswomen's exploitation undermined the economic ends of slavery. Women who resisted could face torture until submission; their children could be sold away; and if the resistance was violent in any way, they could be executed. Women who were sexually assaulted also faced the wrath of plantation mistresses. Attempts to resist sexual assault were futile in most instances; however, "women's submission to these coerced sexual encounters did not constitute consent, but rather a desperate means of survival."[196] Sarah, unaware that Dana and Kevin are married, assumes that Dana is Kevin's slave:

> "Girl…" She smiled a little. "I see you and him together sometimes when you think nobody's looking. You can make him do just about anything you want him to do."
>
> Her smile surprised me. I would have expected her to be disgusted with me -- or with Kevin.
>
> "Fact," she continued, "if you got any sense, you'll try to get him to free you now while you still young and pretty enough for him to listen."....

[194] White, 35.
[195] White, 32.
[196] Marshall, 274.

> I spoke to her softly. "Were you sensible, Sarah? Did you try when you were younger?"[197]

Though Dana pities Sarah, the advice Sarah gives is aimed at undermining white patriarchal and sexual power. It is also a subtle challenge to white slaveholders' claims on the bodies of Black women by using her beauty and persuasive power as a weapon against enslavement. Sarah advises Dana to be strategic with her relationships. Resistance to their slave owners was often seen as dangerous, and Sarah perceives the precarious position Dana is in between two white men. She advises Dana to use this dangerous situation to her advantage, refusing the conditions of bondage to attain a modicum of freedom. Dana is surprised by this advice and pities Sarah's lack of choice. This interaction is a moment of miscommunication, however. Sarah is perceptive. As Rufus grows older, he competes with Kevin for Dana. While Dana refuses to acknowledge this fact, Sarah and later Alice draw her attention to it. What Sarah suggests to Dana on its face does not appear particularly radical; however, Sarah is offering a way for Dana to undermine this form of perceived exploitation.

The conundrum of Dana and Kevin's marriage offers a site through which Butler critically engages the moral, racial, and gendered complexities of enslavement. Butler writes "I gave [Dana] that husband to complicate her life."[198] Here, Butler powerfully calls into question the supposed freedom of contemporary mixed-race relationships. Dana worries that if Kevin stays in the antebellum south that "some part of this place would rub

[197] Butler, 95-96

[198] Kenan, "An Interview with Octavia Butler," 497.

off on him."[199] His survival, should he be without Dana, would require that "he [manage] to tolerate the life here." Dana is clearly worried that Kevin, as a free, white person in the antebellum South would have to be complicit in some way in the slave system to survive. She elaborates that "He wouldn't have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it."[200] Though Dana never explicitly discusses the dynamics of her interracial marriage, this scene indicates that she is aware of the forces and attitudes that sustain slavery. These considerations do not indicate Dana's diminished affection for or loss of trust in her husband. In other words, it is not a personal assessment of Kevin as an individual; rather, it is a larger statement about whiteness as power. It is a moment that signals an astute awareness of the larger social and historical forces at work in the antebellum South, particularly in terms of the force of white supremacy. Kevin feels that if he were left alone in the in the past that he would survive. Even though he lacks the social and cultural knowledge to obscure his real identity as a modern person from Los Angeles, he could pass because he is a free, white man. Which is true; he might well survive and stay under the radar. Dana is aware, however, that while he may survive physically, white supremacy would alter him somehow. As a Black woman, her awareness of race is much deeper than Kevin's, and even though she is new to the Antebellum South, she has a finer understanding of the racial calculus in this period. Dana is aware that while her life is more threatened than Kevin's, this experience may also not leave Kevin whole.

[199] Butler, 77.
[200] Butler, 77.

Even though Dana reflects the same attitudes that diminish the roles of Black women during the time of enslavement, over time she finds that the roles that she and Kevin play are disturbingly easy to slip into as they become “more a part of the household, familiar, accepted, accepting."[201] In conversation with Sarah, who runs the house on the Weylin plantation, Dana begins to consider her positionality in the house:

> [Sarah] had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties….I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. Or it did until Rufus and Nigel drove into town and came back with what was left of Alice.

The conditions in which Dana learns to play the part of the slave undermine the simplistic idea that enslavement was a condition that could simply be rebelled against. Dana begins to learn that attitudes, behaviors, and everyday practices of domination inhere the roles of master and slave such that it is difficult to extricate herself from the role that she must play to survive. The line between herself as a modern, free woman and a bondswoman born and raised on the plantation begin to blur, as both must play a part to survive. Dana learns that Sarah, like herself, is fully conscious of the role she plays for her survival. In private, Sarah removes her mask of obedience, referring to Mrs. Weylin as a "bitch" in the privacy of the cookhouse and lamenting the loss of her family to the auction block.[202]

---

[201] Butler, 97.

[202] Butler, 72.

The problem of Dana's survival being attached to Alice and Rufus' relationship bearing out children makes intervening to help Alice nearly impossible. This complicity and the closeness of Dana's relationship to Rufus also makes bondspeople leery and sometimes hostile toward her. The forms of resistance Dana enacts also sometimes backfire and have deleterious consequences. Dana's attempts to align herself with Rufus is often misinterpreted by bondspeople. Scholars have also pointed to Dana's seeming acquiescence to slavery on the plantation.[203] In other words, while she can sympathize with the plight of the slaves, some of whom are her ancestors, she has no real intent to intervene on the plantation or engage in revolt beyond securing her own survival. She is indeed complicit in the sexual exploitation of Alice. Sarah and Alice at times refer to her as "white n-----" when they perceive that her interests align too closely with those of the mistress and master.

Dana's survival is at times a form of resistance. However, it is also complicated by the violent and shifting power dynamics that sustain the plantocracy. Part of Dana's disguise is to take on the persona of an obedient slave and to be in control of her image when she is around the Weylins. She encounters difficulties in controlling her image when she is around other bondspeople who do not understand her demeanor as a strategy for her own survival, both in the present and the future. Dana's standing within the slave community begins to falter as her apparent allegiance to the Weylin family appears to grow even as the relationship between herself and Rufus deteriorates. All of this places her in an even more precarious position on the plantation. To heal from being brutally whipped in

[203] Flagel, "'It's Almost Like Being There,'" 220.

the fields, Dana ensconces herself in the Weylin home as caretaker to an aging Margaret Weylin. The bondspeople take this as a sign that Dana has continued to align herself with the Weylins to further her own interests. When she returns to the slave cabins, for example, Alice remarks,

> "Marse Rufe really put the fear of God in you, didn't he?"
>
> "Fear of...What are you talking about?"
>
> You run around fetching and carrying for that woman like you love her. And half a day in the fields was all it took….The way you always suckin' up to that woman is enough to make anyone sick"[204]

Sometimes in her attempts to survive, her intentions are misread by the people, such as Alice, whose trust she takes for granted. She understands her actions and motivations are treated with suspicion. Saving Rufus, though necessary for Dana's own survival, is also a decision that appears to result in more pain, death, and violence for the bondspeople. At the time Dana weighs these choices and introspectively questions her own feelings about Rufus:

> I was beginning to feel like a traitor...Guilty for saving him...I don't know what to feel. Somehow, I always seem to forgive him for what he does to me. I can't hate him the way I should until I see him doing things to other people...I guess I can see why there are those who think I'm more white than Black.[205]

Dana's actions and negotiations with Rufus and the bondspeople are every day, complicated forms of refusal that exist on a spectrum of complicity and resistance. The immediate danger of slavery and the existential threat hanging over the novel -- making

[204] Butler, 219.
[205] Butler, 223.

sure that Alice and Rufus have their child, Hagar -- enact a context that make clear-cut noble actions impossible.

Butler's skillful depiction of Dana's situation and relationships is a critique of how clear-cut ideas about choice fail in the context of enslavement. When Alice recovers from her wounds, Rufus sends Dana to ask Alice to finally succumb to his advances. Dana suggests that Alice has "three choices" go to Rufus and obey his orders, refuse, and be whipped, or run away.[206] Dana's ignorance of the impossibility of each of these "choices" is apparent when Alice asks what she ought to do out of desperation. Dana responds, "I can't advise you. It's your body." Because her fate is tied to securing the rape of her ancestor, she feels bound as much as Alice might feel. She cannot advise Alice to go with Rufus because she feels it is morally abhorrent to do so. She also cannot suggest Alice leave or refuse because her fate is tied to the fulfillment of this violent end. Dana shifts the burden of choice onto Alice and clumsily claims that because Alice's body is her own and that it is therefore her own choice as to what to do. Neither Alice nor Dana is free to make her own choices in this context. Dana remains bound by the grandmother paradox, and Alice remains bound by a context of violent dispossession.

FUGITIVITY, WAYWARDNESS, AND RADICAL CARE

Though Dana cannot save Alice from being sexually exploited by Rufus -- either by averting Rufus' plans or by securing Alice's escape -- she does do work on the plantation that was politically resistant. Recent work in Black Studies has theorized forms of

[206] Butler, 223.

resistance that do not engage with movements, instead drawing our attention to practices of refusal and fugitivity as forms of dissidence that are as valid as more visible political interventions.207 These interventions offer a way of understanding resistance outside of overtly political, collective acts of struggle. They also allow us to rethink resistance, politics, and activism. For Campt, the concepts of frequency and silence speak to the methodological perspective that is needed to apprehend practices of refusal since they refer to a disorganized and not overtly political means of resistance.

Like refusal, fugitivity refers to practices that "stage a contestation of the terms of order."208 In theorizing fugitivity, Fred Moten has demonstrated that it speaks to the ways in which practices of refusal and resistance are pathologized and/or criminalized. A fugitive is defined as a criminal who has escaped capture or punishment. In the context of slavery, fugitive slaves escaped conditions of brutal constraint. Escaping the plantation was an overt and material rejection of the totalizing system of capitalism whose fulcrum was the institution of slavery. Taking up this fruitful concept, Moten uses the idea of fugitivity to talk about alternative ways of existing outside of the dominant order. These alternatives are disruptive to the status quo and -- to return to Campt -- undermine the very terms of "diminished subjecthood with which one is presented."209 Fred Moten asserts the power

[207] Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). The concept of refusal was developed by anthropologists Audra Simpson. Simpson uses it to describe an Indigenous practice of rejecting the presumed authority of the state by refusing its markers of legitimacy. Refusing a passport, for example, is a means of denying the state the power to bestow rights, privileges, and recognition. According to a logic of refusal, accepting the state as a legitimate, rights-bearing entity is also a tacit endorsement of its violent settler colonial practices.

[208] Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitivity & Waywardness,” Tramway in Stereo, 2014, video, 2:02:02, https://vimeo.com/151775530.

[209] Campt, “Black Feminist Futures.”

of concepts like fugitivity in disentangling the relationship between freedom and progress. He states, fugitivity "valorize[es] escape over and above freedom as some notion of arrival."210 Fugitivity also facilitates a discussion about qualified forms of freedom.

In the context of dispossession, Dana's care for Alice's life enacts forms of refusal and fugitivity because it is both political and radical in the context of her enslavement. When she is forcibly brought back to the plantation, Alice is bruised and bloodied from being beaten as punishment for running away and assaulting Rufus. Upon seeing her, Rufus exclaims "Damn!...The kindest thing you could do for her would be to shoot her." The consequence of Alice's death for someone like Rufus, is inconsequential, and as a slave in the antebellum South, Alice and other bondspeople's lives are rendered dispensable. For Dana, however, Alice's life is utterly indispensable. Dana's preservation of Alice's life is not merely strategic. Survival for them is political because it is enacted in. "instances where care is employed against immediate crises and precarious futures."211 Radical care was first theorized from the writings of Audre Lorde. Lorde was documenting her struggles with cancer and noting the very radical act of caring for herself and ailing body to survive. In her diaries, Lorde muses, "I wasn't supposed to exist anyway, not in any meaningful way in this fucked-up whiteboys' world."212 So for her survival is political, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."213

[210] Moten, "Fugitivity & Waywardness."
[211] Hobart and Kneese, "Radical Care," 2.
[212] Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (New York: Ixia Press, 1988), 69.
[213] Lorde, 155.

Radical care emerges in the context of "systemic inequality and power structures" and often provides a space of hope during dark times.214. Care speaks to a feeling of empathy or sympathy with people or communities. Dana regards taking care of Alice as "part of my work -- an important part."215 Over the course of a few weeks, Dana tends Alice's wounds:

> I changed Alice's bandages, always checking for signs of infection, always hoping not to find any. I wondered what the incubation period was for tetanus or -- or for rabies….I had enough real worries just keeping her clean and helping her grow up all over again. She called me Mama for a while.[216]

Taking care of Alice is a political act with gendered significance. When she becomes lucid, Alice regresses to a childlike state and must be taught to remember her past. Dana takes on a role as a symbolic mother figure and performs the care labor to resuscitate Alice and bring her back to consciousness. That Dana is figured as a mothering, nurturing figure in Alice's recovery process is significant. Because it is not seen as a practice related to protest or revolt Dana's care work has been undervalued and underrepresented as a meaningful form of resistance in current scholarship. The reason for that perhaps lies in the "normative assumptions baked into care." These assumptions are related to the gendered dynamics of care work, in which care is often associated with women's domestic labor.

---

[214] Hobart and Kneese, 2.
[215] Butler, 153.
[216] Butler, 153.

The labor Dana performs to ensure Alice's survival also entails being the person through whom Alice can channel her anger and frustration. Often, Alice channels her emotions at Dana, contemptuously denouncing her as duplicitous and questioning her allegiances. At one point, Sarah remarks,

> 'What you let her talk to you like that for? She can't get away with it with nobody else.'
>
> I didn't know. Guilt, maybe. In spite of everything, my life was easier than hers. I tried to make up for that by taking her abuse.[217]

After she regains consciousness and remembers that she is indeed a slave, Alice laments that Dana should have simply let her die: "She was getting angrier and angrier, shouting at me. I turned away from her sadly, telling myself it was better, safer for her to vent her feelings on me than on anyone else."[218] Dana's treatment of Alice speaks to how radical care can offer "visceral, material, and emotional heft" to acts of survival in these contexts.[219] The process of Alice's recovery also emphasizes the intimate or interpersonal dimensions of care work.

CODA: BLACK FEMINIST THINKING ABOUT FREEDOM

Dana's overt attempts to revolt against her enslavement are altogether unsuccessful. Her assumption that rebellion was a simple choice is undermined by her own failed attempt at fleeing the Weylin plantation. She is also bound by the role in which she is cast: saving

[217] Butler, 235.
[218] Butler, 160.
[219] Hobart and Kneese, 2.

Rufus so that she and her ancestors can survive. Because she is so bound, her only successful attempts at resistance involve practices of refusal, waywardness and fugitivity. Masking, creating rival geographies on the plantation and radical care work comprise the only ways in which she can attain some freedom in a context of dispossession. The convergence of the scholarly and theoretical trends with renewed visibility of Black queer women's organizing in the BLM era allows us to re-read Butler's novel as both a document and a handbook of Black feminist thinking about freedom.

Examining acts of refusal or fugitivity requires us to consider that which is not thought possible within the terms of our cultural, political, and aesthetic imagination. Harriet Jacobs, for example, who escaped the condition of slavery and spent several years hidden away in a crawl space in that same plantation. Fred Moten describes this as "a modality of escape that requires staying put." To take a more recent example, the looting and rioting that continue to occur alongside the protests over police brutality could be considered fugitive acts. In a powerful viral video, activist and author, Kimberly Jones, ties these threads together and explains the political import of looting:

> "You can't win. The game is fixed. So, when they say 'Why do you burn down the community? Why do you burn down your own neighborhood?' It's not ours. We don't own anything….There's a social contract that we all have. That if you steal or if I steal then the person who is the authority comes in and they fix the situation. But, the person who fixes the situation is killing us. So the social contract is broken. And if the social contract is broken, why the fuck do I give a shit about burning down a Target?...You broke the contract when you killed us in the streets… You broke the contract when for 400 years, we played your game and built your wealth."[220]

[220] Kimberly Jones, "How Can We Win," May 30, 2020, Atlanta, GA, YouTube video, 6:46 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go.

Fugitive or wayward acts may not be immediately discernible as positions of legitimate revolt, escape, or rebellion, especially when they are criminalized. Looting does not immediately register as a political position because in the mainstream, it is perceived as delegitimizing peaceful protest and warranted grievances.

These scholars are no doubt aware of how the criminalization of looting takes on both a racial and political dimension as a means of dismissing political protest that centers Black concerns. In an interview with NPR, scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor remarked that, "riots, rebellions, and uprisings are not demonstrations. This a visceral expression of rage and frustration."[221] Theorizing the affective dimensions of organized protest, Debra Thompson, in "An Exoneration of Black Rage" suggests that Black Lives Matter stages a critique of "respectability politics…whereby Black people are encouraged to alter appearances and behaviors to gain access to the rights that should be associated with personhood."[222] Thompson and Taylor both point out the legitimate feelings of outrage to anti-Black violence that motivate looting, sometimes skirting the questions around morality. Taylor points to the legitimate rage behind these acts: "What are we going to do about the conditions that create this level of rage?"[223] Similarly, Taylor remarks that while looting and vandalism "are destructive forms of Black anger" they do not scale to the

[221] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Why U.S. Needs Black Lives Matter Movement Today," interviewed by Mary Louise Kelly, *All Things Considered*, May, 29, 2020.

[222] Debra Thompson, "An Exoneration of Black Rage," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 458.

[223] Taylor, "Why U.S. Needs Black Lives Matter Movement Today."

violence of police brutality.[224] The morality of looting in this context is less important than whether looting can be represented as a legitimate form of resistance.

A prescient document for contemporary readers, *Kindred* draws our attention to forms of Black resistance that don't engage with laws, movements, or nations. It is just these forms of resistance that Butler's novel enacts, showing how enslaved Black women have always been bold and creative in their imaginings of resistance.

[224] Taylor.

Chapter 3: The Limits of Legal Discourse: Sounding a New Language in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

INTRODUCTION

M. NourbeSe Philip's experimental poetry collection *Zong!* (2008) invokes the experiences of those who perished in the Zong massacre (1781), an incident in which 132 African captives were deliberately jettisoned so that shipowners could claim insurance for lost "cargo." In *Ẹbọra*, the final and most experimental section of *Zong!*, Philip channels the voices of "underwater spirits" who perished in the massacre, doing so in a way that elides easy understanding. Indeed, the spatial and visual layout of *Ẹbọra* at times makes the text deliberately challenging to comprehend. The eye is drawn naturally across the poem, but also up and down the page because there are discernible patterns of stacked words and phrases. This cross-hatching effect produces an unusual textual pattern, akin to rhythmic interludes in printed form. Drawing a parallel between cyclical memory and tidal movements, Philip has characterized her work as "hauntological": "repetition drives the event and the memory simultaneously."[225] The text reproduces these rhythms, inviting readers to consider whole clusters of the text over and above individual lines or words. The emphasis, here, has less to do with what the words mean than it does with producing a new mode of poetic engagement, one that invites the reader to lean into the sensory aspects of the poetry. Printed in a light grey ink, the poetry literally strains the eye and is at times illegible, a reminder that not everything can or should be translated. The opacity of

[225] Philip, *Zong!*, 201.

Figure 2: Philip, *Ẹbọra*, 176.

transposing the experiences of the African captives is central to Philip's "untelling" of the massacre. As phrases are layered upon one another, new meanings are created. Philip pulls apart words that defy easy translation and instead draws out their sounds -- "oh oh,"

"fa fa fa," "i" "oh." There is also a recognizable shift into different languages as Philip imagines what it may have sounded like with the captives and the crew aboard. Here, Philip invokes the soundscape of the Zong. And as with other sections, she enlists multiple voices to tell this story that "cannot be told." The aggregate of competing words, meanings, sounds, and languages demonstrates that Philip is more a conduit than a cipher for this story that has been subsumed into the official narrative.

Zong! is a significant text for this project because of Philip's profound concerns about issues of representation. Her intentionally limited interaction with historical material about the massacre is comparable to authors like Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead who approach their subject matter in a similar way. For example, when describing her intentions for *Beloved* (1987), Morrison emphasized that she did not want to do a literal translation of history into fiction:

> The interest is not the fact of slavery, but of what happens internally, emotionally, psychologically, when you are in fact enslaved and what you do to try to transcend that circumstance. And that really is what Margaret Garner reveals.[226]

Morrison notes that while compiling research for her novel, she avoided looking into the life of Margaret Garner. Instead, she focused her research on the history of Cincinnati and nineteenth century antislavery efforts. As for Garner, Morrison writes, "I

[226] Opera Carolina, "A Mother's Desperate Act: 'Margaret Garner.'" *NPR*, November 19, 2010. https://www.npr.org/2010/11/17/131395936/a-mother-s-desperate-act-margaret-garner.

really wanted to invent her life."[227] In a similar way, Colson Whitehead's latest novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is based on an actual reform school in Florida. Whitehead heard about the school when the *Tampa Bay Times* published a story about a team of archaeology students who discovered unmarked graves of students who were tortured, abused and murdered.[228] When asked in interviews about his process, Whitehead has revealed that he had actually never visited the grave sites nor the school itself.[229] Philip is also wary of delving too deeply reading about the Zong massacre.[230] She limits herself to reading contextual information, histories and reports, mostly.[231]

Philip's experimental poetic voice, which also enlists the voices of ancestors, is an expression of her reverence for the experiences of bondspeople aboard the Zong. In this

---

[227] Rothstein Mervyn, "Toni Morrison, In Her New Novel, Defends Women." *The New York Times*, August 26, 1987. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html.

[228] Frank Rich, "In 'The Nickel Boys,' Colson Whitehead Depicts a Real-Life House of Horrors." *The New York Times*, July 14, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/books/review/nickel-boys-colson-whitehead.html.

[229] Frank Rich, "In 'The Nickel Boys,' Colson Whitehead Depicts a Real-Life House of Horrors." *The New York Times*, July 14, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/books/review/nickel-boys-colson-whitehead.html. and "'Dread, Rage and Despair': Why Colson Whitehead Never Visited the Real-Life Setting of His New Book." *CBS This Morning.* CBS News, July 15, 2019. https://www.cbsnews.com/video/dread-rage-and-despair-why-colson-whitehead-never-visited-the-real-life-setting-of-his-new-book/. As Whitehead came to learn more about the history of the reform school, he describes experiencing "dread, rage, and despair." Instead of viewing the site as generative for his creative process, Whitehead says that if he ever did go to the site, he would want to bring a "bulldozer or some dynamite...it doesn't deserve to be here anymore." See,

[230] Philip, *Zong!*, 190. In "Notanda," she writes "I flirt with the idea of immersing myself in as much information as I can find about this incident involving the slave ship, *Zong*. I begin reading a novel about it but am uncomfortable: 'A novel requires too much telling,'"

[231] Philip, *Zong!*, 190. "My intent is to use the text of the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text."

way, Philip demonstrates a deep regard for collective experience and ancestral memory, which aid her in her poetic engagement with the massacre. Philip expresses concern about letting the silences of the archival text speak for themselves and is careful about ventriloquizing the voices of bondspeople.

I begin this chapter by discussing the historical circumstances surrounding the Zong massacre. Then, I look at how Black Studies theory has understood death under slavery and offer a series of close readings of individual poems from *Zong!*. These poems demonstrate Philip's fierce intervention into the violence of the legal language that condemned the captives aboard the Zong. Philip's use of strategies such as erasure, fragmentation, and multiple languages are all in the service of her poetic re-imagining of the role of the griot. Finally, I show how Philip's *Zong!* becomes a performance text through which the sensory experiences of the massacred Africans can be heard, seen, and felt.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE ZONG MASSACRE (1781)

In 1781, the British ship *Zong* disembarked the coast of Ghana to its intended destination of Jamaica. The ship carried on-board 440 captive Africans and 19 crew members.[232] Under normal conditions, a trip to the West Indies should have taken the crew 6 to 9 weeks to complete. However, under the leadership of its inexperienced leader, Captain Collingwood, the voyage stretched to nearly 12 weeks' time. Though the most lucrative form of commodity exchange during the eighteenth century, slaving was a messy, sordid affair. Based on what historians have documented about the conditions of slave

[232]James Walvin, *The Zong a Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 132.

ships, we know that they were spaces of confinement. Below deck, captives were manacled and separated according to sex: women and children were generally allowed to move around the vessel below, while men were shackled. This atmosphere was poorly ventilated, and bondspeople were left to sit in their own waste, creating "a perfect breeding and transmission ground for certain diseases, especially dysentery."[233] These harrowing conditions were sometimes exacerbated by inclement weather. During a bad rain, for example, the hatches of the ship were shut, and bondspeople had to endure an atmosphere "too hot and unaired to be anything other than fetid and stifling."[234] Death rates among crew members were also high because they came in close contact with the enslaved Africans on board: washing out below-deck areas where bondspeople were confined also brought them into contact with dangerous diseases. As if the conditions aboard the ships were not enough to endure, enslaved people were also most likely held captive on the coast of Africa for weeks or sometimes months.

The trial case *Gregson v. Gilbert (1783)* fails to mention any of these details. Instead, the case focuses on determining which party is liable for the death of the African captives aboard the *Zong*. The only extant document produced by parties involved with the slaving expedition, *Gregson v. Gilbert (1783)* demonstrates that the massacre resulted from a series of navigational errors.[235] When the British ship reached the West Indies, Captain

[233] Walvin, 79.

[234] Walvin, 79.

[235] Walvin, 165. Captain Collingwood died soon after docking in Jamaica. As a result, the ship's logbook was never recovered. The logbook would have contained notes made by the captain and first mate. It would have also would have registered exact amounts of cargo and supplies.. Therefore, it is also impossible to tell with certainty how much water was actually in

Collingwood failed to dock in friendly territory. As indicated in the court documents, the *Zong* could have docked at the port of Trinidad and Tobago to restock provisions and replenish the water supplies before reaching Jamaica. Unfortunately, Captain Collingwood mistook Jamaica for Hispaniola and sailed past Jamaica. Not knowing when he would be able to reach port, Collingwood began to fear the ship would lose water and that Africans would therefore die. In cold calculation and fearing a great financial loss, Collingwood ordered the crew to throw 132 people overboard. As the court case bears out, Collingwood was of the belief that

> if the African slaves on board die a natural death, the owners of the ship will have to bear the cost….the massacre of the African slaves would prove to be more financially advantageous to the owners of the ship and its cargo than if the slaves were allowed to die of 'natural causes'

In the context of maritime insurance law, "natural causes" of death included death resulting from sickness, thirst, or starvation.[236] As Collingwood was well-aware, if the captives died as a result of water deprivation, the insured would be liable for the loss.

When the damages were accounted for, the shipowners for whom Collingwood worked (Gregson) appealed to the insurers of the voyage (Gilbert), requesting to be reimbursed for the destroyed cargo. However, the insurers disputed the request and refused payment to recoup Gregson's losses. Thus ensued a lengthy court proceeding. The insurers claimed that the cargo (comprised of human beings) was not harmed by circumstances

---

store during the time of the massacre. Presumably, it would not have contained the names of the captive Africans.

[236] Jane Webster, "The *Zong* in the Context of the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade," *Journal of Legal History* 28, no. 3 (2007): 285–98. These forms of death are of course not natural and were the direct result of the brutal, inhumane conditions aboard the slave ships.

beyond the Captain's control, (i.e., bad weather, dangerous ocean conditions) but that the captain himself destroyed the property. According to this logic, slave's lives became "a matter of liability" only under conditions beyond human control. Since Collingwood was not besieged by "the seas or by enemies," the insurers felt they were not liable. During the first court case, the judge found that the insurers Gilbert were liable. In an appeal, the case went all the way up to "the Court of King's Bench, where Lord Mansfield, the Lorch Chief Justice of England preside[d]."[237] Though the same evidence and arguments from the previous case were reproduced during the second trial, more details emerged: "Collingwood saw that the market was not ideal for the slaves he had transported and so he took 'means of transferring the loss from the owners to the underwriters' (insurers)."[238] Insurers again cited Collingwood's inexperience as evidence that he was responsible for the loss. Rudimentary and partial as they may be, these are the details of the Zong massacre.[239]

PHILIP'S POETIC INTERVENTION

M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 poetry collection *Zong!* emphasizes her ongoing engagement with issues of language, legal discourse, history, and ancestral memory. As with her other creative work, in *Zong!* Philip participates in a mode of creative critical

[237] Walvin, 79. Mansfield was familiar with suits having to do with the status of enslaved people as property. He is most well-known for his ruling in Somersett v. Steward (1772), also known as the Somersett's case. This judgment found that it was illegal for enslaved persons who set foot on English soil to be forcibly removed and sold into slavery in English colonies.

[238] Philip, *Zong!*, 221.

[239] There were never any criminal charges brought against Collingwood because the deaths were never treated as murders. The case document underscores the status of African captives as property.

inquiry about the archive as a site of knowledge production, a site that produces "knowledge about African diaspora subjects and subjectivity."[240] A lawyer herself, Philip understands how a person "can be transformed into a thing by the law."[241] Resisting the impulse of telling a story, Philip expresses the silences of the text through engaging sensation, especially sound. Philip actively works against remembering the Zong massacre, resisting the imposition of her own story onto the poems.

Zong! is also part of a genre called erasure poetry. Erasure poetry is a subcategory of what are called found poems, which use already written text as their raw material. The found poem "'keeps the words just as they originally appeared, merely rearranging them into lines to bring out their poetic quality.'"[242] A found poem might take a written document and highlight or circle particular words, having those isolated words take the form of a poem within the original written text. The raw material for a found poem could be derived from magazine or newspaper articles, speeches, advertisements, bureaucratic or state documents and letters, among others. Found poetry is always going to have a layered context because it is an intertextual form. As a subcategory of found poetry, erasure poetry either blacks out the text or erases it to produce a new meaning. Participating in this genre, Philip takes the words from the legal document of the insurance case and experiments with its language, using words like "fragmented," "fractured," "cut up," "rent and torn," and

[240] Patricia Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (January 1, 2008): 64.

[241] Philip, 196.

[242] Laurence Foss, "Poetry Is Where You Find It: Found Poetry," *Journal of Popular Culture* 5, no. 4 (1972): 821.

"random selection" to describe her method of composing the poems.

Figure 3: Philip, *Os*, 32-33.

Though Philip describes her method of composition as pulling apart the legal text, the spatial order of Zong #18 is laid out with symmetrical balance and neat twin columns. Each side, though separate, represents a long chain of signifiers that redoubles and builds in meaning as the poem continues. The effect is to create a level of indeterminacy in meaning that is belied by the ordered, rational shape of the poem. The columns seem also to play on the ordered layout of a ledger. A ship's ledger would have represented captive Africans as human cargo. Presumably, it would not have contained the names of the captive Africans. Common practice during the eighteenth century was to identify "purchasers" by

name and represent Africans by "the stark description of 'negroe man,' [*sic*] 'negroe woman,' or more frequently ' ditto man,' 'ditto woman.'" in ship ledgers. This fact perhaps explains the paucity of historical material detailing the experiences of the bondspeople aboard the Zong.

Philip works within the bounds of the 1783 legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert* to produce much of the collection, figuratively modeling the forms of subjection experienced by those who are consumed, erased, or are otherwise limited by the law. Paradoxically, as Philip writes, "it is within that dispossession within the law that we find our freedom...by exploding it - from the inside."[243] In this way, the poems in *Zong!* are Philip's expression of a story that she feels must be told. Indeed, Philip's speculative engagement with history is driven by a persistent desire to connect with the perspectives of the captives on board. In an interview with Patricia Saunders, Philip references Jacques Derrida's theorization of mourning: there is a need, she paraphrases, to know where the dead are buried and where their bones lie. The painful desire to know and the utter impossibility of knowing what happened could, Philip says, "become a space of craziness." Nevertheless, she contends that the bones "actually ground you" when confronted with the limitations of memory and the archive. *Zong!* encapsulates Philip's self-described task of finding the form to acknowledge, commemorate and offer some form of redress for the dead.

Visually striking, the poems in Philip's collection are divided into five books: *Os*, *Sal*, *Ventus*, *Ratio*, *Ferrum*, and *Ẹbọra.* Each of these titles, apart from *Ẹbọra,* are derived from Latin: *Os* for bone, *Sal* for salt, *Ventus* for wind, *Ratio* for reason, and *Ferrum* for

[243] Saunders, “Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive,” 67.

iron. The first section, *Os*, takes the *Gregson v Gilbert* document and explodes the text into poetry. In the remaining sections, Philip extends her poetic scope beyond the court case, incorporating new words and sounds in successive sections. Some of the words are derived from European languages, and some come from African languages. Other words are of unknown origin. Philip provides a glossary of "Words and Phrases Heard on Board the *Zong,"* which includes several words derived from Arabic as well as languages from Europe and Africa. The glossary does little to orient the reader; perhaps this is not its purpose. The glossary provides further evidence of Philip's interests in the affective dimensions of experience. Following this section is Philip's version of the ship's manifest, which includes an account of *African Groups & Languages, Animals, Body Parts,* and the people making up the crew.

I use the term 'speculative optic' to describe how Philip engages her primary sources to "tell a story that cannot be told but must be told." The emphasis in notating and defining these words is less about decoding the messages in the poems than it is about extending the collection's speculative optic. Here, Philip envisions or imagines what may have happened aboard the Zong without imposing her own narrative onto those experiences. I use the term optic, as opposed to aesthetic, to get at Philip's relationship to the actual archival document. Quite literally, we can imagine Philip sitting with it, looking at it, and looking through it. It is a shorthand for describing the author's method of trying to capture something about those experiences within the bounds of the legal archive. Speculative optic suggests both the process and the product: what she is looking at and what we are looking at. The *Notanda*

is the final section of the collection where Philip describes her motivation and method for producing the poems.

Here, I have outlined the context for the Zong massacre and the representational stakes of Philip's poetry collection. Philip's concern with speaking for those who cannot speak is evident in her poetic method. Throughout the collection, she imagines enlisting the voices of her ancestors and focuses on the sensory dimensions of experience to tell the story of the Zong massacre. In what follows, I discuss the limitations of legal language and how Black studies has understood death and agency under the law. I interweave close readings of Philip's *Zong!* to demonstrate her poetic critique of the legal archive.

"THE ORDER IN DESTROY": SLAVERY, THE LAW, AND CIVIL DEATH

In Zong #2, Philip undermines the fiction that Collingwood's decision to kill the kidnapped Africans was based solely on financial calculations. Gregson argued that market logics -- which emphasize decision-making based on cost, supply, and demand -- determined the fate of the human cargoes. Therefore, the mass death of the captive Africans on board is never treated as a criminal act. Taking Gregson's rationale as a point of departure, Zong #2 begins exploring "the order in destroy." The word "order" emphasizes

Zong! #2

the throw in circumstance

the weight in want

in sustenance

for underwriters

the loss

the order in destroy

the that fact

the it was

the were

negroes

the after rains

Wafor Yao Siyolo Bolade Kibibi Kamau

Figure 4: Philip, Os, 4.

both the financial reasoning for Collingwood's decision and the arrangement of slave society. Ideologically and materially, the slave system is sustained by a Western conception of order, which inheres relations of dominance by producing ideological meanings to confirm them. Commercial slavery was also rationalized as a logical extension of capitalism and the colonial project. Bondspeople's limited existence within the purview of the law is part of the "order" that Philip names. As historian Jeremy Krikler says, the Zong trial "kills the victims" of the massacre another time because they are refused "a posthumous existence under the law."[244]

As historians have pointed out, legal documents -- including slave codes, local statues, trial documents, and policies in the metropole and colonies -- articulated competing notions of personhood for bondspeople that were at times paradoxical. As Colin Dayan states, "slave law thus both created and contained the subject."[245] Dayan illustrates these oscillating representations (of bondspeople as both people and property) through the concept of 'civil death': “the state of a person who though possessing natural life has lost all civil rights."[246] The "legal fiction" that solidified the double character of the enslaved was a necessary disfigurement of personhood that sustained the slave system.

Orlando Patterson's definition of enslavement and his examination of slaves vis a vis the law gives us purchase on this concept of civil death. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson takes issue with modern definitions of enslavement because they define slavery

[244] Krikler, “The Zong and the Lord Chief Justice.” 37.

[245] Colin Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 44.

[246] Dayan, 44.

"only as the treatment of human beings as property."[247] This definition, he argues, is misleading because it does not accurately reflect how bondspeople were represented in the law. Patterson asserts that "[p]roprietary claims and powers [have been] made with respect to many persons who are clearly not slaves."[248] Husbands and wives, serfs and kings, children and parents, slaves and masters all have proprietary relations to one another in varying degrees. Thus, according to Patterson, the slave is "a subcategory of human proprietary objects" rather than the sole category.[249] What then is the nature of this relation? What makes bondspeople distinctive from other groups who are treated as property objects? Patterson outlines the answers to these questions by examining how the slave is represented in the law. He observes, "there has never existed a slaveholding society...that did not recognize a slave as a person in law."[250] The law has always represented bondspeople as both property and people. This is of course a paradoxical representation of enslaved people; however, that is not the point according to Patterson. The double character of bondspeople is what makes this group a distinct category of persons. Rather derisively, Patterson chastises scholars who highlight this paradox only to point out the logical inconsistencies of the slave system. This, he says, is a red herring argument. Instead, he argues the double character of the enslaved is key to understanding slave societies.

Zong! reflects how the legal text simultaneously conceived of the captives as both human and property. In Zong #8, Philip examines the choices made aboard the Zong during

---

[247] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death : A Comparative Study / Orlando Patterson.* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 21.

[248] Patterson, 21.

[249] Patterson, 21.

[250] Patterson, 22.

the massacre: "the good of overboard / of property / fellow." The word "good" suggests that the throwing overboard of the kidnapped Africans served the common good, assuming that in the context of the trial document "fellow" would only refer to the European crew. "Good" and "property" also identifies the kidnapped Africans who were regarded by merchants and insurance companies as chattel. In reflecting a moral judgement and financial calculation, the word "good" also identifies the feelings of the ship's captain that the massacre was justified. The notion that these murders were somehow justified for the common good of the crew and captain is a legal fiction. However, in the context of *Gregson v. Gilbert* this reasoning was the very basis for litigation in two separate trials. Understanding this world and its paradoxes are key to understanding the way that Philip is attempting to pull apart the court document as a rhetorically powerful medium.

In line with Patterson's assessment of slave law, the Zong trial document recognizes Black agency while simultaneously claiming Africans as human cargo. Because commercial insurance law focused on the minimization of risk on voyages, litigators had to account for slave rebellion. *Zong!* reflects this conundrum by ruminating on the doubleness of these identities. In the quoted lines above from Zong #8, the word "fellow" follows the word "property" on the subsequent line, which may reflect the dual and opposite quality of these ascriptions in the trial document. However, what Philip also seems

Zong! #8

the good of overboard

justified a throwing

of property

fellow

creatures

become

our portion

of

mortality

provision

a bad market

negroes

want

for dying

Abioye Gulai Sekelaga Dalili N'Nanna

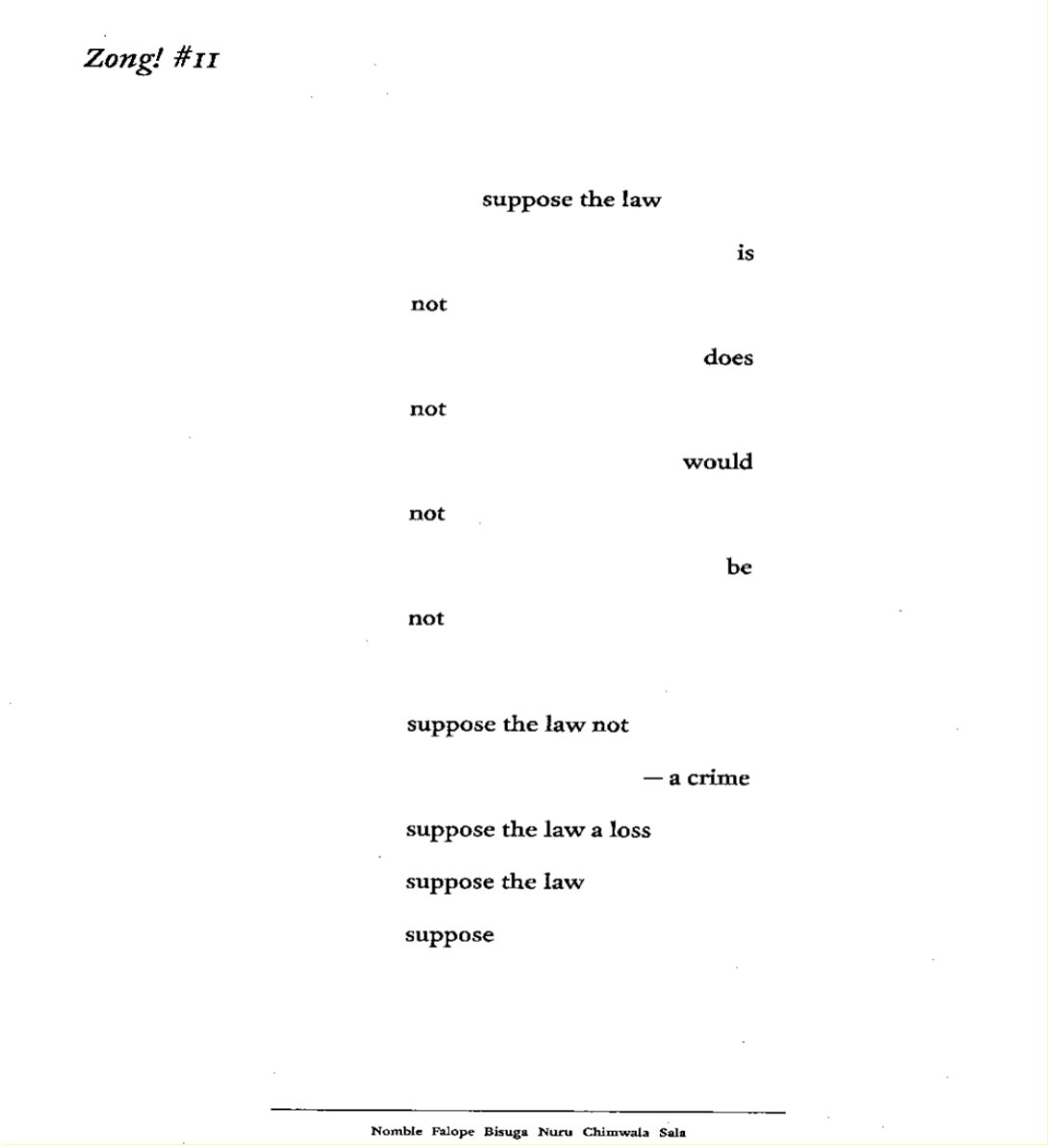
Figure 5: Philip, Os, 16.

to suggest is that the African cargo were both property and fellow human beings. Both words also appear in the court document: "It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property." This line demonstrates that those adjudicating the insurance dispute, particularly the insurers, must have been aware of the agency of human cargo.

This fact is further corroborated by how insurers accounted for slave rebellion in their policies. Maritime insurance law of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was "meticulous" in its accounting of risk; therefore, "the consistent and rebellious agency of Africans ensured that human life, as well as commodity status, had to be recognized by traders and their underwriters," as Anita Rupprecht contends.[251] In fact, insurers would actually not insure traders against insurrection because it was such a commonplace hazard of the trade.[252] The prevalence of rebellion also shows that African captives resisted their commodity status at every turn on board slave ships.[253] As Ruprecht points out, these "policies have it both ways. They construct Africans as goods but goods with agency."[254] Philip describes this obsession with precise documentation in historical documents as "a violent and necessary ordering" that often emphasized the fungible identity of the African cargo. As is demonstrated in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case, the legal text struggled to bring into representation African captives. The "mania for system and certainty" in maritime insurance law was oftentimes more important than any consideration of whether the law

[251] Anita Rupprecht, "Excessive Memories: Slavery, Insurance and Resistance," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 64 (2007): 21-22.
[252] Ruprecht, 21.
[253] Ruprecht, 15.
[254] Ruprecht, 21.

made practical sense.[255] Throughout *Zong!* we can see Philip's attempts to disavow a system of thought that could rationalize the murder of human beings for a collection of



Zong! #11

suppose the law

is

not

does

not

would

not

be

not

suppose the law not

— a crime

suppose the law a loss

suppose the law

suppose

Nomble Falope Bisuga Nuru Chimwala Sala

Figure 6: Philip, *Os*, 20.

[255]Jeremy Krikler, "The Zong and the Lord Chief Justice." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 64 (2007), 32, 35.

profit. At the textual level, Philip also refuses "the violent grammar" of the legal text, more particularly, insurance law, which defined kidnapped Africans as "cargo" and which accounted for their bodily and psychological harm only in financial terms.

By readjusting our focus to the law itself, Philip explores how it "dwells on, messes with, and consumes persons."[256] In Zong #11, Philip turns her attention toward the law's representational power by "pressing the law to answer unconventional questions."[257] The word "suppose," which is repeated throughout this poem, reminds us of Philip's speculative optic. To suppose is to consider, to ask what follows, to conceive or imagine – quite simply, it means to speculate. On the page, which is laid out in nearly symmetrical division, Philip postulates what the law is or does, versus what it is not. The ordered layout of the poem signifies upon the rationalism that structures the legal text. Though Philip invokes this symmetry, she problematizes the law's representational power. The word "not," which is repeated and stacked in a neat column on the left side of the page, signifies negation or absence. According to the syntactic structure of the poem, we can take the word "law" as the subject tying together the clause that is strewn across the page. Taken together the syntax and spatial layout of the poem produces dual meanings: Philip considers the effects of the law in one column and its inverse effects in another, calling attention to how the law has the power to simultaneously make and unmake human beings.

[256] Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog,* xi.
[257] Dayan, xi.

Zong #11 also highlights the rhetorical power of the law in shaping our interpretations of events. Visually, the poem is structured so that the word "it" stands to one side, followed by a series of interpretations of "it" in a column to the right. The various interpretations on the right suggest that "it" may refer to the Zong massacre or several other issues related to the court case. The word "it" appears in several places across the poem, suggesting that "it" is a floating signifier that shifts in relation to the clauses that follow. "It," for example, could refer to the act of determining liability for lost human cargoes ("it/has been decided"); the throwing overboard of captives (it/was justified); the recognition of the captives as human beings ("it/was impossible"). "It" might also refer to the fact that the Zong trial was not about determining criminal culpability ("it/need not be proved"). The poem is written in the passive voice, a register that allows Philip to emphasize the event or action ("it") and the subsequent lines that indicate how the event or action was determined or interpreted ("was justified/has been decided/was said"). Though the law is never explicitly mentioned, at the level of syntax, it is a present absence in the poem. Because it is written in the passive voice, the true subject is deferred. Often, the question that remains after reading the lines on Zong #11 is "By whom or what?" If written in sentence form and allowed to reach its conclusion, one line might read for instance "It has been decided by the litigators" or "It was said by Gregson" and so on and so forth. The liberties I take with the prose of the poem are only to demonstrate that by leaving the true subject outside of the poem, Philip recreates the sensation that the court document and the lens of the law is a powerful and prevailing force around which the meaning of events are given significance.

Figure 7: Philip, *Ferrum*, 127.

By the time Zong! arrives at something like *Ferrum*, the text finds its way out of *Gregson v. Gilbert* and the poetry loses all recognizable structure. Each section moves

beyond numbered poems, seemingly shedding its outward order. The language of the poem also expands, becoming looser and more freeform. Here, Philip incorporates words from many languages, some of which she records in her glossary and others of which refuse to be translated. Rather than emphasize the plurality of meaning, these sections "amplify the phonetic and aural properties of language," abandoning the sign-system of language and dislocating the reader in the process. The collection continues to register meaning beyond the dominant idiom of the legal text. The font also changes, heightening the many textures of the poem. In *Ferrum* and subsequent sections like *Ratio* and *Ẹbọra*, there appears to be more emphasis on the sound and acoustic environment enabled by the shape and plurilingual quality of the poems.

Here, I have elaborated Dayan's concept of civil death and discussed how the law figured the captives aboard the Zong as both human and cargo according to Patterson. I have also demonstrated Philip's critique of the limitations of legal language through her poetry. In what follows, I examine how Philip's poetic engagement offers an alternative to the law's representational strategies. Through her engagement with sensory memory and performance, Philip highlights creative ways to register history's impacts.

ZONG! AS A PERFORMANCE TEXT

Zong! is a performative remembrance of the sensations and experiences of those aboard the Zong and those who perished. In her poetic reimagining, Philip taps into "the physical, sensory elements of original experience," which seem to have an energy of their

own and may “have lingered in memory” far beyond the actual event — and those who were there — have passed.[258] To borrow Christina Sharpe's words, "There are...no bones to recover" from the site of the massacre.[259] And, as Philip says, the text is "hauntological….where the spectres of the undead make themselves present."[260] *Zong!* sounds the voices of the dead through "moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not-tell the story."[261] Upon closer examination of the content in *Zong!*, we can see that Philip's engagement with “sensory memory” allows her to narrate what may have happened at the time of the massacre and beyond.[262]

Philip makes the archival text "speak" in a new way, sounding a new language from the insurance case document.[263] Visually, it is as though Philip has taken the words making up the trial document and smashed them, shattering the legal text across the page. When treated in this way, the syntax crumbles and syllable-by-syllable the words are pulled apart, producing an alternate language. Though not immediately discernible or coherent, the sounds that emanate from Zong #1 suggest a strong desire for expression. When read aloud, each letter is articulated slowly, reminiscent of someone just learning how to read or even

[258] Thomson, “Memory and Remembering,” 84.

[259] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 38.

[260] Philip, 201.

[261] Philip, 196.

[262] Thomson, “Memory and Remembering,” 83. Research in memory studies has shown that there are three types of memory: “short-term memory, long-term memory, and ‘sensory memories.’” Sensory memories have to do with memories triggered by taste, smell, sounds or images.

[263] Sharpe, 19.

speak. Perhaps this is the collective voice of the dispossessed that Philip pries out of the

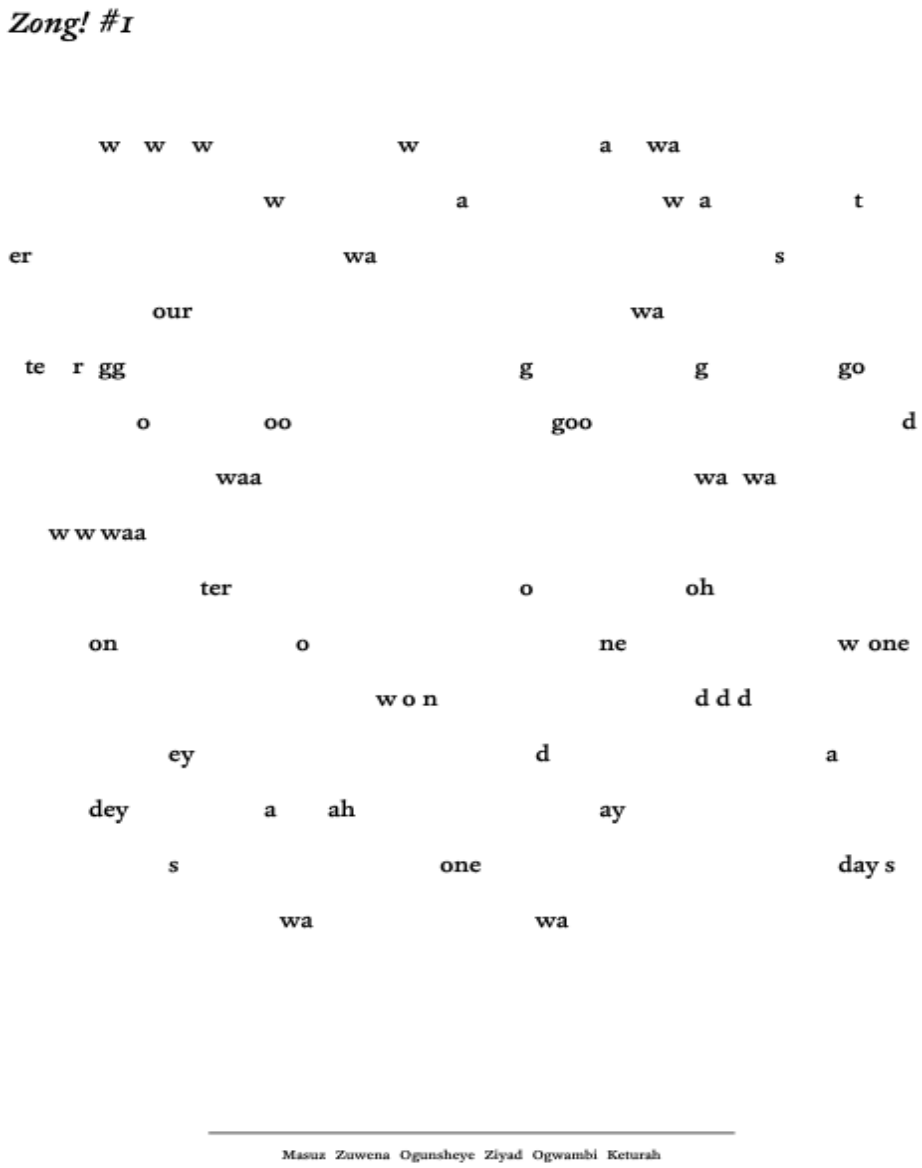


Figure 8: Philip, *Os*, 3.

archival document, speaking for the first time. Or, is this the chorus of those thrown overboard, speaking through Philip from an underwater grave? Philip extracts moans ("o," "oo" "goo"), grunts ("oh," "gg," "d d d"), wails ("waa," "a"), and cries ("ah," "ay") from the metered prose of *Gregson v Gilbert.* Gasping sounds are audible in "w w w a ww." And, as Christina Sharpe observes, we can also detect the chattering of teeth in "d d d" and gulping or choking sounds of water filling the lungs with "g g go o o o."[264] The soundscape of the poem suggests an emphasis on collective articulation and experience.

The immediacy of the event is captured through sound but is interrupted by the names listed at the bottom of the page, a name for each imagined ancestor aboard the Zong at the time of the massacre. Though visually treated as footnotes in the poems, these names are meant to interrupt the transition from one page to the next, providing a pause to remember and reflect on the ancestors as Philip describes them. Bestowing dignity to the dead, Philip observes, means locating their bodies so that they are recognized. While there are ways of describing this process for those buried on land (exhuming, unearthing, disinterring, etc.) Philip notes that there is no word to describe bringing someone back from a "liquid grave." There are "words like resurrect and subaquatic," for example, but "what is the word for bringing bodies back from water?"[265] If the limitations of our language suggest there is no way to bring back those lost at sea, where does one look for the remains or "the bones," as Philip says? The negative space of the legal text provides one means for

[264] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 478.
[265] Philip, *Zong!*, 201.

retrieval; it is a space "not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning." In Zong #1, this space is given a sonic dimensionality. By pulling apart words and stretching them to produce new sounds and meanings, Philip also introduces more negative or blank space on the page.

In attempting to “make sense” out of the massacre, Phillips eschews the epistemological framework -- the order and logic -- that structures insurance law. Senses in the western tradition of thought, particularly in terms of enlightenment epistemology, are thought of as appendages of the rational mind. In common parlance, “to make sense of” refers to the effective application of one’s mental faculties to understand, denoting intelligence or awareness. Phillips offers an alternative to sense in this regard, underscoring her interest in sensation over and above sensing or “making sense” as it is traditionally understood. The text begins to qualify the case, troubling the authority that the legal document has in describing what happened and in representing the African captives. Philip writes, in Zong #2 " the that fact / the it was / the were." The careful arrangement of articles and subjects emphasizes the contingent nature of the facts of the Zong trial as they were mentioned in the court document. The article "the” and pronoun "that" suggests that the facts and events, which seem to command their own authority in legalese, are circumstantial and subjective – interpretive rather than definitively true statements of what happened. As much as maritime law is focused on calculating real risk and organizing for contingencies, the grammar of the legal text is based on a dissociation from material conditions.

Like modern-day griot, Philip acts as a conduit for ancestral memories and experiences, transposing them without translating them onto the page. In "Notanda," Philip underscores her attitudes about the relationship between fiction and history and demarcates her project as one that focuses on histories of slavery and ancestral memory. As demonstrated through her critical treatment of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, Philip's project is one that exposes the limits of legal discourse. How does one tell the story of the Zong massacre in this way? This is something that Philip grapples with, beginning "Notanda" with the refrain: "There is no telling this story. It must be told."[266] On the cover of the book, Philip is listed as the author with the added description, "As told to the author by Amadu Boateng." This fictional author represents Philip's ancestors.[267] Throughout "Notanda," Philip references the presence and voices of her ancestors, thanking them for "bestowing the responsibility of this work" on her.[268] The relationship between Philip and her fictional ancestors also speaks to the idea of the griot of the West African tradition. Griot figures are "oral historians" who pass down tribal or communal history through storytelling, song, and performance. This "oral performance" can be a form of entertainment, but it can also offer insight into a community's history, beliefs, and values.[269]

The griot model for storytelling offers Philip a poetic mode through which to access the experiences of those aboard the Zong. The griot figure embodies a form of storytelling

[266] Philip, 189.

[267] On the author description, Philip writes "Setaey Adamu Boateng is the voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the *Zong."*

[268] Philip, *Zong!*, xii.

[269] Hatch, Sherry, and Sherry L. Hatcher, eds. “Encyclopedia of African American Writing.” In Oral Tradition (Including Griots, Storytelling, Not Oratory and Speeches), 2018.

that is connected to song and rhythm. Music often accompanies the griots' stories and songs. Moreover, histories, details and additional stories are passed down through centuries. Consecutive interlocutors (other griots) supplement these historical epics, adding details "about their lives and the lives of their audiences." In this way, the griot performance is a collective, multigenerational affair that sustains ancestral memory. These parallels to Philip's own poetic engagement demonstrate that she is working in a distinctly African-diasporic form of storytelling. It is a form that might have even been legible to the kidnapped Africans aboard the slave ship.

During durational readings, Philip enlists the help of artists and audience members to immerse themselves in the text, collectively speaking through ancestral memory. There are several renditions that are available to view online, and they incorporate music and dance into a traditional reading of the poems. During these engagements, Philip and audience members read and chant poems all at once, creating a cacophony of unintelligible sounds and words. Many sway to their own rhythms, walk around the collective space or sit alone reading aloud. The performance spaces themselves are intimate, mimicking the style of a salon. Attendees often dress in white. The lighting for the most part is dimmed and focused on the stage. During the 2013 durational reading in Toronto Philip sings aloud in dialogue with another woman. Behind these interlocutors is another person, reading aloud to himself. Accompanying those on stage are several instrumentalists: a pianist on electric keyboard, a bassist, and a drummer. Philip and the woman then begin to sing the poem, chanting in rhythm to the music being played.

The collective readings of the poem demonstrate the role of memory in performance. Scholarship in oral history has shown that "memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings."[270] Working with people's memories, oral historians have shown that memory's "unreliability" is actually a rich context to mine for historical scholarship, since memories can reveal connections between "past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory."[271] These memories — when recalled in conversation with others, for example — typically involve participants telling stories about their past experiences. Remembering an event does not involve mechanical reproduction of fact, but the creation of an ever-shifting narrative. It involves both storytelling and performance, in which storytellers appeal to and communicate with audiences. To quote poet and theorist Charles Bernstein, "In performance, it becomes possible to lay down a rhythmic beat, a pulse that is otherwise more speculative or tenuous in the scoring of words on a page." Rhythm, beat, and tempo supplement the striking visual and spatial layout of the poem, giving the text material depth and acoustic dimension.

The kind of storytelling that occurs in Zong also involves what Erica Johnson calls "memory work." Johnson, argues that 'memory work,' confronts what Edouard Glissant calls 'nonhistory,' that is, the discontinuous, fractured nature of diasporic history[272] This

[270] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader,* eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 37–38 (London: Routledge, 2006).

[271] Thomson, "Memory and Remembering," 82.

[272] Johnson, "Building a Neo-Archive," 151.

confrontation between an author and the absence of material history involves trying to "remember in the face of collective erasure" by addressing the limitations of personal recall and transgenerational memory through a recognition of the ghostly traces of past events[273] For example, in the wake of anti-Black violence and BLM activism, Philip has performed *Zong!* for Travon Martin and the 2020 global reading was dedicated to "Black lives lost on board the slave ship Zong, as well as Black lives that continue to be unnecessarily lost or taken today." The memory of George Floyd gave weight and resonance to the performances held this past year.

Philip's annual durational readings of the collection shed light on the significance of performance and collective memory in telling a story for which there is no telling. The experimental nature of her annual durational readings enacts -- and quite literally gives materiality to -- the collective and ancestral voices Philip enlists to help her tell the story that cannot be told. It is an idiom that is freely associative, non-linear, and deeply attuned to the improvisational inheritance of the African-diasporic storytelling tradition.

[273] Johnson, 152.

Epilogue

The aim of this project has been to demonstrate how authors of African descent have employed experimental formal strategies in their neoslave narratives, strategies that have produced alternative ways of knowing historical truth. I show that these experimental modes of representation are also the means through which authors have intervened in contemporary debates about Black representation and the afterlives of slavery. These texts are also alternatives to the narratives produced and legitimized by the archive on slavery. Furthermore, I have identified the neoslave narrative as a global genre whose antecedent is the slave narrative. In this final section, I broaden my focus to discuss how the neoslave narrative fits within an African-diasporic literary tradition, and I elaborate on its connection with the slave narrative. My interest in Black literary production is focused on specific literary strategies and an intertextual, literary project of historical counterrepresentation of which the neoslave narrative is a part.

Though scholarly engagements typically privilege a U.S. context, the slave and neoslave narrative "have emerged from every site of the diaspora where people of African descent are present in significant numbers."[274] My use of the term "African-diasporic" entails a literary genealogy that may work with and through difference to connect diverse traditions of Black literary production. At the same time, this framing necessitates a recognition of cultural and ethnic differences, so that real diversity of cultural experiences, interests, and categories are not overlooked. I turn to Henry Louis Gates' method for

[274] Aljoe, 11.

outlining the connections among disparate literary traditions across the diaspora and connect it to my own method. For Gates, this involves locating the elements of culture and forms of expression that survived the Middle Passage. For instance, he identifies Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey as two central figures of the African vernacular and African American literary traditions respectively:

> I have argued for a consideration of a line of descent for the Signifying Monkey from his Pan-African cousin, Esu-Elegbara. I have done so not because I have unearthed archeological evidence of a transmission process, but because of their functional equivalency as figures of rhetorical strategies and of interpretation.[275]

The means through which Gates identifies a shared "line of descent" between these two rhetorical figures is by revealing their shared function or purpose. Gates' theory situates the African American literary tradition around "the formal properties of African American intertextuality" over and above narrowly defined "biographical and sociological contexts."[276] Nevertheless, the theory he outlines does consider "the different sociopolitical contexts within which black literary production occurs" without reducing the study of Black letters to ethnography.[277] In a similar way, this project has attempted to show the intertextual nature of the neoslave narrative with earlier literary antecedents. Bringing together literature by authors writing from many sites of the African diaspora, this project

[275] Gates, 72.

[276] Katherine Clay Bassard, "The Significance of Signifying: Vernacular Theory and the Creation of Early African American Literary Study," *Early American Literature* 50, no. 3 (2015): 850.

[277] Bassard, 851.

also situates their modes of representation along a shared "line of descent."[278] I argue that the relationship of neoslave narrative to the slave narrative also signals its embeddedness in an African diasporic tradition.

Like the slave narrative, the neoslave narrative draws upon the folk roots of the oral tradition, mobilizing experimental modes of representation and storytelling to imagine experiences of enslavement. The neoslave narrative is also connected to oral traditions because it is a polyvocal and heterogloss genre. For example, these texts are characterized by multiple and shifting narrative registers; the use of creole words, terms, and dialects; and the deployment of a variety of languages (English, French, Spanish, Kreyol, Yoruba, etc.). The intertextual relationship of the neoslave narrative to its literary antecedent, the slave narrative, approximates a form of call and response. In an experimental way, the neoslave narrative can represent experiences of enslavement that are otherwise erased or not present in the archive on slavery.

Each chapter in my dissertation explores how neoslave narratives offer new paradigms of registering the legacies of slavery that are informed by an awareness of the limitations of how historical meaning is produced. The authors under consideration in this dissertation demonstrate their representations of slavery and bondspeople's personhood. They are also invested in documenting the legacies of slavery. I will briefly review the contributions of each text so that I may clearly outline how these experimental formal

[278] Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 139. What Gates always makes clear is that the tradition of Black literary production he looks at is not defined solely in racial terms. For example, "The blackness of black literature is not an absolute or metaphysical condition…nor is it some transcending essence that exists outside of its manifestations in texts. By 'blackness' here I mean specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised."

features contribute to a larger literary tradition and project. Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* signifies upon eighteenth-century writing by English-speaking authors of African descent and revises its tropes. Phillips' strategic selection of primary source material in his neoslave narrative is a method of composition that demonstrates an awareness that the historical document is not neutral. It allows Phillip to show how early Black authors' preoccupation with representing the Black self in writing is a generative template to explore competing notions of citizenship and national identity in contemporary Britain.

In more experimental texts, *Kindred* and *Zong!*, authors demonstrate the significance of the affective and corporeal dimensions of knowing the past. The grandmother paradox, introduced through Butler's use of time travel as a narrative device, imposes upon Dana forms of constraint that parallel restrictions bondspeople experience in the novel. These conditions of constraint prevent Dana from resisting enslavement in overt, visible ways. The novel, however, introduces readers to subtle forms of resistance that were most often available to women. I show that Dana's radical care work enacts forms of resistance most like waywardness, fugitivity, and practices of refusal.[279] Finally, M. NourbeSe Philp's *Zong!* de-prioritizes the voice of the single author in telling the story of what happened during the Zong massacre. Instead, through strategies of erasure, fragmentation, and multiple languages, Philip embodies the role of the griot, mobilizing ancestral memory and incorporating performance in her poetic reimagining of the massacre.

[279] I credit the work of Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese with introducing me to the concept of radical care work.

I have documented how the neoslave narrative arose out of concerns about misrepresentations of the nature of slavery and out of renewed interest in slave testimony to better understand the psychological experiences of bondspeople. This intertextual project is reflected in other neoslave narratives, and importantly it is a literary project that is historically rooted in the representative stakes of the slave narrative. The neoslave narratives in this dissertation are also invested in the legacies of slavery and use their work to elaborate theories about how slavery impinges on the present moment. Overall, they reveal the shared patterns of representation that have emerged out of the institution of African Atlantic slavery. The neoslave narrative extends the representational project of the slave narrative by featuring experimental ways to register its impacts and through offering new ways of understanding the past.

Bibliography

Aljoe, Nicole N. Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives of the British West Indies, 1709-1838. New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2012..

Barker, Chris. The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies. SAGE Publications, 2004. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=334584.

Bassard, Katherine Clay. "The Significance of Signifying: Vernacular Theory and the Creation of Early African American Literary Study." Early American Literature 50, no. 3 (2015): 849-854.

Bell, Bernard W. The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.

Bell, Bernard W. "The Contemporary Afro-American Novel, 1: Neorealism." In The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, 235-277. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.

Benson, Kimberly W. "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American Literature." In Black Literature and Literary Theory, edited by, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 151-174. New York: Routledge, 1984.

Birat, Kathie. "Delegated Dominion: Language and Displacement in Cambridge by Caryl Phillips." Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines no. 72 (1997): 26-36.

Bould, Mark. “The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF.” Science Fiction Studies 34, no. 2 (2007): 177–86.

Bourne, Jenny. “‘May We Bring Harmony’? Thatcher’s Legacy on ‘Race.’” Race & Class 55, no. 1 (2013): 87-91.

Butler, Octavia. “Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: Black Women and the Science Fiction Genre.” The Black Scholar 17, no. 2 (1986): 14–18.

“Cambridge Words and Early Writing,” Uncat MSS 15, box no. 10, folder 6

Camp, Stephanie M. H. Closer to Freedom : Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Campt, Tina.“Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity.” October 7, 2014. Barnard Center for Research on Women, New York, New York, video, 1:55:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ozhqw840PU.

Campt, Tina. Listening to Images. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Campt, Tina. “Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: A Salon in Honor of Saidiya Hartman.” March 4, 2019. Barnard Center for Research on Women, New York, New York, video, 1:52:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD_b8cXI0rk&feature=emb_title.

Carretta, Vincent. "Introduction." In Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African, edited by Vincent Carretta, 13-36. New York: Penguin Classics, 1998.

Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." The Black Scholar 12, no. 6 (1981): 2-15.

Dayan, Colin. The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." South Atlantic Quarterly 92, no. 1 (1993): 735-78.

Donnell, Alison. “Introduction.” In Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture, edited by Alison Donnell, xii-xvi. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Dubey, Madhu. “Speculative Fictions of Slavery.” American Literature 82, no. 4 (2010): 779-805.

Eckstein, Lars. Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory. Amsterdam: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006.

Edwards, Paul and Polly Rewt. "Introduction." In The Letters of Ignatius Sancho, edited by Paul Edwards and Polly Rew, 6-7. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994.

Ernest, John. “Introduction.” In The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative, edited by John Ernest, 1-20. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014.

Equiano, Olaudah. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself. Edited by Brycchan Carey. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018.

Farmer, Ashley D. Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Flagel, Nadine. " 'It's Almost Like Being There': Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's Kindred." Canadian Review of American Studies 42, no. 2 (2012): 216-45.

Fleischner, Jennifer. Review of Harriet Jacobs: A Life. Legacy 22, no. 1 (2005): 78-80.

Foss, Laurence. “Poetry Is Where You Find It: Found Poetry.” Journal of Popular Culture 5, no. 4 (1972).

Gates Jr., Henry Louis. Signifying Monkey : A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. Cary: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Gilroy, Paul. Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991.

Gilroy, Paul. “…‘To Be Real’: The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture.” In Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance, edited by Catherine Ugwu, 12-33. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

Glymph, Thavolia. Out of the House of Bondage: the Transformation of the Plantation Household. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Gordon, Avery. Ghostly Matters Haunting and the Sociological Imagination. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Govan, Sandra Y. 2005. “Going to See the Woman: A Visit with Octavia E. Butler.” Obsidian III 7, no. 1: 14–39.

Goyal, Yogita. “Africa and the Black Atlantic.” Research in African Literatures 45, no. 3 (2014): v-xxv.

Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw. A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself. In Slave Narratives. Edited by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Library of America, 2000.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In Identity, Community, Culture and Difference, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222-237. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.

Hall, Stuart. "New Ethnicities." In Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 441-49. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” Small Axe 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

Hartman, Saidiya. Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

Hobart, Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani and Tamara Kneese. "Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times." Social Text 38, no. 1 (2020): 1-16.

Jaros, Peter. "Good Names: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa." The Eighteenth Century 54, no. 1 (2013): 1-24.

Johnson, Erica L. “Building a Neo-Archive: Dionne Brand’s A Map to the Door of No Return.” Meridians 12, no. 1 (2014): 149-171.

Johnson, Erica L. “Ghostwriting Transnational Histories in Michelle Cliff’s Free Enterpris.,” Meridians 9, no. 1 (2009): 114-139.

Jones, Kimberly. “How Can We Win.” May 30, 2020. Atlanta, GA. YouTube video, 6:46. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb9_qGOa9Go.

Joseph, Peniel E., ed. The Black Power Movement : Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era. Florence: Routledge, 2006. Accessed March 27, 2020.

Kelley, Robin D. G., Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Kenan, Randall. "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler." Callaloo 14, no. 2 (1991): 495-504.

Kennon, Raquel. "Neo-Slave Narratives." In Oxford Bibliographies in “Literary and Critical Theory” New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0017.xml.

Krikler, Jeremy. “The Zong and the Lord Chief Justice.” History Workshop Journal 64, no.1 (2007): 29–47.

Levecq, Christine. “Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler’s ‘Kindred.’” Contemporary literature 41, no. 3 (2000): 525–553.

Lorde, Audre. A Burst of Light. New York: Ixia Press, 1988.

Low, Gail and Marion Wynne-Davies. "Introduction." In A Black British Canon, edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, 1-12. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Marshall, Amani. "Resistance." In Enslaved Women in America: An Encyclopedia, edited by Diana Ramey Berry and Deleso A. Alford, 272-276. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012.

Miller, D. Quentin. "Introduction and Overview: The Stories of African American Literature." In The Routledge Introduction to African American Literature, 8-26. London: Routledge, 2016.

Moten, Fred and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitivity & Waywardness," Tramway in Stereo, 2014, video, 2:02:02, https://vimeo.com/151775530.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement," The Drama Review, 12, no. 4 (1968): 29-39.

O'Callaghan, Evelyn. "Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips' Cambridge." In Journal of Commonwealth Literature 28, no. 2 (1993): 34-47.

Olney, James. "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," In The Slave's Narrative, 148-174. Edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Olusoga, David. Black and British: A Forgotten History. London: Pan MacMillan, 2017.

"Oral Tradition (including Griots, Storytelling, not Oratory and Speeches)." In Encyclopedia of African-American Writing, edited by Shari Dorantes Hatch. Amenia, New York: Grey House Publishing, 2018. http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ghaaw/oral_tradition_including_griots_storytelling_not_oratory_and_speeches/0?institutionId=4864.

Oxford, Bodleian Library POSTER 1978/9-34b: https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/715bdb88-e7a7-436b-855c-9f26ada19d73/.

Patterson, Orlando. Slavery and Social Death : A Comparative Study. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Philip, Marlene NourbeSe. Zong! Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Phillips, Caryl. A New World Order. New York: Vintage Books, 2002.

Phillips, Caryl. Cambridge. New York: Vintage Press, 1991

Portelli, Alessandro. "What Makes Oral History Different," in The Oral History Reader, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London: Routledge, 2006. 37–38.

Procter, James. "Recalibrating the Past: The Rise of Black British Historical Fiction." In British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010), edited by Deirdre Osborne, 129-143. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016

Rose, Mark. Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.

Rowell, Charles H, and Octavia E Butler. "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler." Callaloo 20.1 (1997): 47–66.

Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "Slavery and Historical Memory in Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction." In The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature, edited by Ezra Tawil, 236-249. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Rupprecht, Anita. “Excessive Memories: Slavery, Insurance and Resistance.” History Workshop Journal 64, no. 1 (2007): 6–28.

Sancho, Ignatius. "Letter XIII to Mr. Soubise." In Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African, edited by Vincent Carretta, 46-47. New York: Penguin Classics, 1998.

Saunders, Patricia. “Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip.” Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12, no. 2 (2008): 63-79.

Schiff, Sarah Eden. "Recovering (from) the Double: Fiction as Historical Revision in Octavia E. Butler's Kindred." Arizona Quarterly 65.1 (2009): 107-36.

Sharpe, Christina. In the Wake: On Blackness and Being. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Simpson, Audra. Mohawk Interruptus: Political life across the Borders of Settler States. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Springer, Kimberly. "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism,” In The Black Power Movement : Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era, edited by Joseph E. Peniel, 105-118. Florence: Routledge, 2006.

Steinberg, Marc. "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative." African American Review 38.3 (2004): 467-76.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. “Why U.S. Needs Black Lives Matter Movement Today.” Interviewed by Mary Louise Kelly. *All Things Considered*, May, 29, 2020.

Thompson, Debra. “An Exoneration of Black Rage.” South Atlantic Quarterly 116, no. 3 (2017): 457-481.

Thomson, Alistair. “Memory and Remembering in Oral History.” In The Oxford Handbook of Oral History, edited by Donald A. Ritchie, PAGES. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Vint, Sherryl. "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-slave Narratives." Afrofuturism 34, no. 2 (2007): 241-61.

Walvin, James. The Zong a Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Waugh, Patricia. Harvest of the Sixties. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Webster, Jane. "The Zong in the Context of the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade." Journal of Legal History 28, no. 3 (2007): 285–98.

Weedon, Chris. "British Black and Asian Writing since 1980." In British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010), edited by Deirdre Osborne, 40-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Wikipedia, s.v. "English Subjunctive," last modified July 9, 2020, 14:45, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_subjunctive.

Raymond, Williams. Marxism and Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Williams, Rhonda Y. "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power" In The Black Power Movement : Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era, edited by Peniel E. Joseph, 79-104. Florence: Routledge, 2006.

White, Deborah Gray. Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985.

Wood, Sarah. "Exorcizing the Past: The Slave Narrative as Historical Fantasy." Feminist Review 85, no. 85 (2007): 83-96

Yetman, Norman R. "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection." American Quarterly 19, no. 3 (1967): 534-553